The Worlds of Candra

by
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Dyjan Publishing.
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Introduction

Beginnings are easy. In the beginning. Once upon a time. It was a dark and stormy night. A long time ago . . . etc. When you start something, it always seems easier and more terrifying than anything else, but the terror is soon replaced. You forget the terror and only remember how easy it seemed.

And it doesn't matter what it was you started. When you begin that starting point often gets obscured, glossed over, and subtly ignored, so beginning is often unconsidered.

But nobody forgets or ignores the end.

Endings are messy and complex, you have to fit all those little strands together and make them satisfying and you have to do it while knowing full well there's so much more that could be done, so much more that could be said. Should I have told her I loved her? Him? Is it too late to walk away from this disaster, do I valiantly stride through Gethsemane knowing it will be my ruin? Is that heroic or cowardly?

Will anyone even care?

If they care, will they care because they knew me, hated me, wanted to see my death or celebrate it, or wait patiently by my side as the life ebbed out of me?

And that's just life.

Consider every book, every story, every poem, every image, the flicker of a thought once conceived and at once ended, and all those other thoughts you might have had that you didn't, even as your one thought ends.

Is your imagining the same when you started it as when you ended it, are the hopes you had in youth the same as they are now? Or the despairs? Did you imagine you would end up dead as a young man or woman ending your days in a haze of glory only to somehow survive now the ending becomes the thought of decades yet to come, an empty canvas with nothing to scrawl upon it because you thought your perfect end was supposed to

happen, and hasn't happened yet?

Endings are never easy. And they shouldn't be.

Everyone wants to imagine the end after all. You're taught that there was such a thing as a golden age, a time before time when everything was perfect and so you turn all your thoughts backward, imagining if only you had lived at the beginning things would be easy for you now.

But likewise, everyone imagines the end too, some perfect conclusion of their life and something afterward, something that explains everything, something that makes everything make sense, and when you have that, that ***ending*** then everything that happened before will click into place like a well-oiled machine and in that perfect thought true endings pale, the messy complex details seem unreal and frightening and less satisfying than one hopes for, or despairs against.

But that's life and you don't always get the chance to hit the right note at the right time and that's good, that's okay because wherever the story ends, is good enough.

It shows that you were here.

If beginnings are easy and endings are complex don't worry about either. The real test of the story isn't 'in the beginning,' and it's not 'they lived happily ever after.' It's all that minutia in between. Some people call that life.

Other people call that the way things are.

After all no one remembers when they began and usually one won't remember themselves a second after they end.

Prologue

There was nothing at the beginning, no light nor heat nor depth, no wasting barren plains, no jungles nor deserts nor stars nor dragons nor demons nor lawyers nor law, nor love. Then he opened his eyes.

Some few scholars have debated this moment but since none but he existed then their speculations are of course limited. A few, when he and his kin walked the worlds asked, "What was it like in the time before, and what was it like when you first opened your eyes?"

Sometimes he'd answer. He'd stare at the stars he fashioned, glance slantwise at a world on the other side of the sky, and rumble for a time, deep in thought with himself. In those early days, (early as he measured time though a billion years might have passed, or perhaps as few as a million,) he'd wander his creation, crossing blue sands and crimson forests, sail or stride across green seas, and he'd ponder the words in his heart, measure them, lick at their meaning, and then he'd answer truthfully as he could.

"I don't know," he'd say. "There was a time before then I opened my eyes and a moment later Myr flickered across my consciousness, and then was. Remaliah and Xara followed and with them came my family."

Then he'd turn the question backward to his askers.

"What do you remember of the moment you were born, the moment you were conceived?"

Most would shake their heads in ignorance and claim they couldn't remember.

"So too I," he'd reply.

Some, in trying to name them called them gods. It's a storyteller's term and means a very amorphous thing. A god after all must obey certain rules. They must be powerful. Byrgirou and

his family surely were since they were the first beings and since they carved the stars as driftwood, since each footfall of theirs engraved a continent into existence.

A god must also be knowledgeable. And loving. Merciful, proud, judgmental, law-giving and law-abiding. A god must not only carve the stars but carve some moral precept into a self-made shape and pour that wisdom acidlike into the minds of their creation. And if a god's creation runs afoul of some imperfect detail that god has the inalienable right to cause misery, suffering, and death. A god must be feared, must elicit some nameless terror and must never, ever, ever be questioned. For being gods they know everything and therefore must judge everything the perfect ones have made as wanting. Or so some storytellers have said.

But in this respect, they were not gods at all.

Let us go over the details first. Byrgirou was the starting point, the self-emergent being at the start of existence itself. He stood upon nothing in those early seconds, his wings held shadow over a plain of oblivion. Let us describe him at this moment.

A face peered out upon the deep, sharp splintering teeth, eyes like twin moons, fur scarlet as blood might be though blood is only red upon a few scatterings of spheres. The form he subconsciously gave would be described as a lion though the fur was red, and at his shoulders, two great batlike wings emerged. Of course, neither bats nor lions existed at this moment but a few scholars have wondered if perhaps such creatures exist in their current form because, in that act of self-awareness, some echo of himself permeated his creation, some subconscious clue as to his proper shape left as an edifice in diverse places. Consider his face after all, which was not that of any lion.

Some poets in meeting Byrgirou described him in the most minute detail, his massive rippling limbs, his claws, each talon sharper than obsidian, his eyes gazing wonder at all he made, and

in lofty articulations made him out to be the epitome of grace and power, strength and nobility.

He'd often laugh privately at such thoughts but let them linger in the air. He did not want to insult them.

So first he came to being and then in a moment he dragged out of the lingering dreams of his mind three planets. And then giving them light took a talon and scratched lengthwise night, creating small sparks against his thoughts as suddenly a star emerged.

He carefully placed the desert closest, then forests, finally the sea, and carefully grew the sun, first a spark then a flame then an incandescent force, then a blind groping inferno, and in a moment, he was gazing down at his creation and standing upon the desert which grew more deeply into focus with each step he took.

Then he spoke the word and suddenly a city appeared. And others. Blue women with black tattoos about their eyes, strange runic patterns emerged, suddenly strode some cities of stone and he breathed hard and realized he was no longer alone.

And in the crimson forests were people like serpents given arms and legs in their bright red robes who crossed between trees whose leaves skimmed the skies, and suddenly ships appeared upon the bright green waters.

And he was amazed. He was surprised.

Those few beings when they were given the chance to tell their stories, etch to parchment or stone their first thoughts explained they had always been. From their perspective the sun had existed forever, their countries forever. Each recalled fathers and mothers, some told their histories which spanned back who knew how far and all of it was utterly true. For Byrgirou had not simply fashioned earth or stars but done something more extraordinary.

He had fashioned a history.

There was a time before and there was a time now but the

time before, it was not a moment ago but a billion years, more, untold billions, and striding across the libraries of stone cities he read their observations of other worlds.

And there were. Beyond the thick violet clouds of Myr where the bone-winged ainyr sail and skim forever the dreamers, the poets, the watchers of the skies noted stars.

But he had not created stars.

But his children had.

He could see them suddenly, oh so suddenly. Ayrith, H'velul and Kaivelul, Donegal and Maesquirn were his sons, grandsons, and Gyaleloria, Csolyel, Khedrua, Kykairen, Yyaalis and Chaliardra his daughters, his granddaughters. They were the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the corin manticore race whom some called gods.

There were others, he could not count their number, they were as sand upon the shore and he marvelled at them all.

And each in their turn fashioned time.

And a woman came to him, blue-skinned as the sky and gazing down she gazed up and asked him his name. And he spoke for the first time in existence and he said, "My name is Byrgirou."

"My name is Kyskalios," she said.

And so, the creator of the universe was introduced to his creation.

Were this any other story one would assume the first moments of existence were perfect but of course such a thought is absurd. There is no moment of utter perfection in a world, no ideal idyllic paradise where nothing can go wrong.

The lands had strife and conflict, had war, and all that Byrgirou could do was create. If he willed an earth to being it already was, a billion years of change condensed to a second's space. And so, creation was unfilled as he and his children walked across the worlds and if their minds flickered with an

idea, a dream or thought, suddenly it was.

And none expected a perfect beginning. But when the tragedy struck, when Byrgirou clasped to his thoughts the dying body of Donegal and Yyaalis he imagined a perfect end. Ah, but I have gotten ahead of myself. And the story truly does not begin on Myr or Remaliah or Xara, on Gamad or Zyrn or even amid the nine moons of the shifting sky oceans or ocean skies of Vornas. The story begins on a small island on a small planet near the edge of a small island of stars.

The name of the island is Kyos.

The name of the world is Candra.

Chapter 1
The city of the end of things

Gamad is a world of iron, of steel continents and rivers of liquid iron where dragonflies flitter on wings of interlaced metallic wires interspersed with membranous crystal. The peoples who dwell upon Gamad fear neither fire nor weapon, have no terror toward sickness nor death nor pain. They fear but one thing and one thing only, those peoples made of iron.

They fear the rain.

It was raining that day, the last day Kuty would ever see her mother. She rose early on that final day, rose from a bed specially made for her, slender and thin, not like the vast ocean of stone her mother slept upon which seemed so vast only because Kuty was small for her age and for the form she should have had.

She glanced at her room. It was black stone designed to hide her away. In the old days great labyrinths had lingered under the island. The wardens knew of them, had known of them for centuries but didn't worry over them since the labyrinths led nowhere and they had tallied each prisoner since their exile to Kyos so many centuries before.

But Kuty had been undiscovered and so her room, her world was undiscovered by them.

Her mother and father had seen to it.

She rose and went across to the washing wall and placed her hand against it, letting her hand slide into the soft stone. The water skinned across her, the ever-perpetual minute waterfall which was now drawn across her naked body, her light skin suddenly enveloped in a shroud of moving water.

It crossed through her long black hair, across her face, down past her small breasts, her stomach, ("a patch of sunlight

never wavering," as her mother said, some song she'd learned which meant . . . something, but neither knew what anymore,) her legs, then deposited itself at the foot of the wall, completing its circuit.

The water drew off the small particles of dirt and sweat and skin and Kuty thought a moment about her mother who had no need for such a thing. Her skin was like steel, impervious to all but the force of the wardens.

After getting showered Kuty left her room, the small soft bed, the rows of books which sang to her of other lands, even far Zanaan from whence her people came, and then she began her run.

Afterward she knew she'd return to let the water cleanse over her again. Normally the run would come first but today was the last day. She wanted a chance to remember and take in every aspect of the life that she had led to this point, even if she had to do some things again.

The labyrinth was black yet utterly bright. The kyrarai had no need of light but her father had known illumination was needed so he swam north away from the lands they knew. The wardens had watched carefully but taken no action. So long as the kyrarai never touched landfall they were mostly exempt, as long as they returned to Kyos by eight-sixteenth day.

The walls were etched, written by fingers which climbed into the stone, a jagged script which told the history of the kyrarai. Far above Kuty had seen towering black cities, great galleries meant for creatures who stood as tall as the wardens' hands and so could almost be considered giants in their own right.

In her earliest memories, she had listened to her mother whisper of the old days when the kyrarai spanned their realm from Kyos through the Shannix Hills as far as the edges of the Fire Wastes. There was a tinge of sadness, of misted longing in her tone and once or twice Arlistriya's voice would break. Kuty

had nestled into her mother's arms and listened in the great galleries as she learned of where the bones of her people lay, scattered to the Orsane Plains or upon the desert, the last legacy and monument of their entire race beyond the borders of Kyos.

Sometimes in those early days, she'd imagine the kyrarai in their prime, the way they shadowed out the sky when they flew, the way they could cross not merely a continent nor a world but worlds, beings made in the partial image of their maker.

But it always returned to the same end. They had been left exile here for almost four thousand years and whenever Arlistriya wondered why she'd need only look at her daughter and remember. Long before the bones of the kyrarai were laid lengthwise in sand were the bones of so many others who had laid their foundation first.

Kuty could hear her mother's voice breaking for she knew the depths to which they'd fallen long before they'd lost.

Today is the day, Kuty said to herself as she passed the corridors and galleries, as once or twice she stared upward at the ceiling which was the thin membrane between the twin halves of what remained of the world they ruled.

Today is the day I escape.

Ibasuqe had flown twenty years before. When he had learned Arlis was pregnant and realized the enormity of it, he knew what he had to do. Across the other side of the water was Calranus, one of their former cities. The wardens never touched it, leaving the three cities intact as monument and constant reminder. They dared not touch the foundation of their lives. So long as the cities lingered, so long as storm-demons remained the wardens had purpose, agenda, life. To move a stone from the edges of Calranus would have been blasphemy. The cities of their former overlords had become their gods, their rationale for being. That and making certain the storm-demons never troubled Candra again.

There had been three who flew, of the four who remained. The kyrarai had long lives; four thousand years translated to roughly ten generations, each dwindling to half what it had been.

They flew west on great leathern wings while Arlis lingered by the shore, watching as the wardens crossed the River Seel heading directly for the doomed.

Ibasuqe scoured the city searching for it. Them. Where? Not in the great ziggurat. He roared through libraries of the old ones finding only dust and ruin and the obliterated names of kings.

No. Not in the Making-Chambers where the jalal, arlgith, and the giants had been changed or conceived. He passed the cylinders where flesh still stuck to walls quivering softly as if in reverence at his passing, but could not find what he sought.

The wardens were upon them then. Xaisjuestria and Mair-Vaisoqtreuia stood sentry. They watched as the wardens came, each footfall shaking slightly the ground. Both bared their fangs and threw themselves against the giants, each of whose hand gripped tightly the storm-demons and drew them to eye level before crushing their bodies to powder and tossing them to the ground. Later the wardens would collect those broken bodies and deposit them upon Kyos. It was their way to maintain the lineage of their purpose. They watched the storm-demons, living or dead.

Where? The sun reached its height now, the air smelt of an acidic blood and Ibasuqe was running out of time. He closed all of his eyes and thought. Not the ziggurat, not the flesh-mechanics chambers, not the library . . . the observatory.

He flew, snatching fingers into the obelisks of stone as the wardens came, moss-shrouded figures whose hooked noses jutted forward, cornering their prey, sensing his pulsing heart, each flake of skin trailing across the air from them to him, but it was there. Yes, at the top he smashed the walls and came face to face with them.

Two jewels. Small, tiny. Were they them? It? In the

circular room, the jewels were positioned on a dais in the middle, one black, one green, and as the hand slowly crawled forward like a marching thunder which he felt rather than saw, he screamed, mouths opened swallowing the jewels as instinctively the wardens closed their eyes at the sound of their despair-riddled prey.

It unnerved them to imagine the storm-demons behaving as living, sentient, frightened beings.

He felt his bones break. Arms, legs, thighs crushed in an embrace somewhere between love and scorn and pity. He half-imagined the warden who ended him didn't want to, really. But he had no choice. It was the rules of their behaviour to kill the kyrarai who ever returned to the land of their beginnings. Even if Ibasuqe was one of the last and they couldn't accept the loss of their purpose, still, they couldn't accept the loss of their rituals either. Caught between two states of being Ibasuqe's life came to an end.

The three bodies were then carefully wrapped in shrouds as the wardens waded across the sea to the last storm-demon lingering by the shore. They placed the bodies there and turned away.

So, one remained. They had not noticed she was pregnant. Soon it would seem her child was never born. And she would, at least seem to be, the last.

Kuty ran in the labyrinth. In her head, her mother's words came to her again. She was carried with each step, back further and further to the time before when the kyrarai dominated all the lands but Lrruisa to far south where the ships of storm and shadow came which raced across the sky . . . she shook her mind to the moment and stopped. Since her birth twenty seasons ago her mother had spent herself to pour into her daughter all she might know or need to know.

Long ago to give credence to the lie Arlis scattered along

the shore beams of wood, a wreckage in miniature in just a night. It had taken ten seasons to gather the pieces and then to arrange them in the most perfect minute manner of ruin by the rocks and when the wardens came to look, they saw a few strips of cloth, the dead ship, and the sound of moaning as if from many men.

The wardens were under orders of course. Once a ship beached for any reason all abroad her, be it elf or human, moselantja or tairen was deemed lost. No exceptions. One could observe from a distance the dead and dying but take no action against or for them. They were deemed lost but not ignored.

And so, when Arlis came upon the sands and clutched to her . . . what was that? A bundle, a shrouded form, small, smaller than a human or elf should be . . . a child? Barely a child, an infant had survived the wreckage, and the warden upon the further shore noted with a clinical calm the details, small pale skin, long dark hair, plaintive wail, (engineered by her mother,) till the warden could but shake his mighty head in sadness and then go on his way.

And that was that. Kuty became known to the wardens though known not as she was but in the guise of another's flesh.

And now, twenty seasons later, all was in readiness.

Kuty in her role as the shipwrecked child had to vanish. Her mother explained it to her; the wardens had to see Kuty once as a child and then only be given the smallest hints. Was she dead? Had the evil storm-demon devoured the poor girl? The wardens had begun to crane their necks out over the water an inch a season noticing the kyrarai along the shore with only the vaguest glimpses of the girl.

"Does she even exist?" Baligostria asked.

The leader of the wardens stood upon the farther beach and watched the storm-demon walk. The monster strode from the city of the end to the shoreline, glanced upward at her jailor then bent down on oddly bent legs and picked at a few smooth stones.

The warden loomed at her. He was not flesh so much as presence, as will. His green moss-soft hair roiled with the wind and his hooked nose itched toward the obsession of his life. He did not so much see the demon as sense her. Keened over so many centuries the wardens knew, (or thought they knew,) each subtle hint of their quarry and the meaning of their lives.

What was that? Yes, there it was. At the smallest ebbing of his perceptual awareness, Baligostria caught a scent of something not kyrarai. Softer smell, like crushed sand, no, no, no, wrong word, not sand, earth, and suddenly he recalled when a human caravan had wandered by and he caught a scent of a cloud of skin which sloughed off them like fine mist as his nose detected the subtle hints, the traces of their lineage, noting not only how they smelled but their ancestors before them.

Turning to Hydraxaspe he watched as he too became aware. It was true. Another was on Kyos besides the storm-demon.

Of course, there had been others. A few servants or slaves made by the monsters but Baligostria knew she was the last. And in that thought lingered an ancient terror.

"So, we know now," Hydraxaspe said simply, the younger warden tossing his great head toward the monster in mockery.

"Yes." Baligostria turned and walked away.

Arlis smiled and returned the way she came.

Yes, Kuty had to be revealed in increments, a stage at a time. Baligostria especially had to ponder the meaning of the girl.

"Why do I like this mother?" Kuty asked when young and everything else seemed bigger then.

"You are the shape of something rare in this part of the world. When I am gone you will be swept over to the other side," her great wings shielded the young girl as she spoke and for a time Kuty nestled to her mother's side, terrified at the thought of being alone, "and on that other side the wardens will come to

you. You will be the last link between what we are and what you are and they will ask you questions, about me, about what I was like. You may tell them truly anything except from where you came and how you came to be."

"And then?"

"The wardens will either release you or hold you a time, but on the farther shore far from here, and soon enough my sweet child they will focus not upon you but me. My bones. The giants will come en masse."

"Why?"

"To mourn. I am the last. Without me they will have no purpose in being anymore."

It started to rain on the day she readied her escape.

She was free to step above ground now. The wardens heard sometimes the sound of lashes, of moans, a few shrieks of pain from galleries and halls but always so diffused it was impossible to tell if she was being harmed, if some other was perhaps tortured, (was there only a girl left, or girls? Or men? Though how could the monster hold a menagerie without being noticed? How could so few wardens ever see a single girl?), and so uncertain in what was happening more and more wardens clamoured to the shoreline.

They could have merely stepped across the waters but to do so was taboo. There was some shadow of a fear in disturbing the island, not a curse or a blasphemy but something more insidious. They feared their presence might somehow endanger the demons and if the demons were endangered what might happen to them?

So, they waited, more and more, upon the farther shore.

Imagine a labyrinthine wall of statues, each standing half the height of a mountain, each slowly rumbling like out of thunder, limbs stalwart as tree trunks but thicker than the walls of the most impregnable of cities. Moss clung to their bodies,

green oceans of living movement swaying in sympathetic rhythm to their heartbeats. Eyes yellowed as blasphemed gold stole glances across black waters as mouths slowly opened wide and the long hook noses bent forward, massive spears sharpened to blunt points as the final plaintive moaning sounded, and sounded, and stopped.

Kuty had emerged above ground and as she did Arlis produced the last noises of her abuse. In the black gallery the kyrarai had a machine which allowed one to mimic various sounds, something her people would have considered a tome. The wardens knew nothing of it and cared less. Only the storm-demon mattered, not what some ancestor of hers had done. Of course paradoxically, everything her ancestors had done led them to this exile now.

This irony was not lost on her.

At the time as Kuty could clearly be seen exiting the black gallery through great mile-high doors of blunt obsidian Arlistriya could be seen striding the topmost tier of the great ziggurat. No ambiguity, no question of the cause of death. Arlistriya couldn't have the wardens imagine the human slave guilty of her end. She shuddered to imagine what they might have done to Kuty.

Now.

The air was clear and oddly touched of grey and she rose on great wings and sailed straight up as if in triumph as the human slave slunk away. And then and only then she clutched at her chest, *(make it look good, make it look right, Striagith died this way a century before and Baligostria's predecessor would have taught him this, make it look right Arlis, you only have one chance,)* as all at once her wings failed her.

"What's happening?" Hydraxaspe asked.

"It's her hearts," Baligostria said, "something's wrong with them." He stepped out into the icy waters, his every instinct forcing him to move and his every fibre of being telling him to stay. Of course, they could march into the water, could even leave

the bodies of the dead but he felt he was going to step foot upon the island and the only restraining thought was none had ever done it before. Not in a thousand years.

The poison was working she knew, the sensation beginning. They knew nothing of this, couldn't have known, and as she rose higher, she looked down just once, pretending to scream at her own daughter as her daughter looked up. And she fell.

The city of the end came into view then. She saw the great ziggurat at its heart, the long, cobbled streets in their spider web pattern from the ziggurat, and saw the buildings crouch upward like curling beasts then gazed out across the waters to the other city of the end.

Knowing her daughter would be safe she was content.

By now her eyes closed. She felt herself falling but didn't see it. Her last memory was not of cities or streets or the hoary frost-headed fools with mouths agape watching her. Her last memory was Kuty nestled in her arms as she carefully sang to her a lullaby of home.

Her body crumpled to the stones and she was gone.

Kuty ran to her mother as the thunder struck. It had rained hours before, clearing (on cue) in the final act of her mother's performance. The rain left a glistening sheen to everything and she was by her mother's broken body as another thunder struck.

A footfall.

The giants were coming now.

She was sobbing uncontrollably as they came and without realizing she couldn't stop. A litany of memories poured through her; seasons of listening to her mother's stories, her knowledge of the old ways suddenly cut forever.

And a voice came to her then through the fog of

recollection.

"It'll be alright," her jailor said.

And then she was gently carried away from home.

Chapter 2
This milk soft moon
smooth wine of mine

Xalmen is a world of storms, endless sea and rocky isles, and shorelines littered with hoveled huts clinging like primordial shells anchored to the greying stones. The sailors of Xalmen, those grey women and grey men who go out, who lash themselves to the skins of ships carved from broken bones of ancient beasts, what do they cry out when the storm is black and the world is night? They sing, rejoicing in the faces of their enemies.

Kuty had to cool herself then. She was no longer Kuty, the girl who laughed in the labyrinth, ran, freely darted in the dark places, and sang the old songs imperfectly. Now she was Kuty the girl taken by the evil monster and raised to be a slave, perhaps worse, perhaps unaware of the outer creation hidden from her, (by the actions of the wardens either way,) and as Baligostria bent down on his massive legs shadowing the once appearing sun she had to stifle a scream. As he spoke, as she was carried, she had to stifle her screams but whimper just enough to be believable.

Were human she would scream. In her rooms she practiced sometimes, her mother correcting her performance, ("a bit louder, yes, now sing sharply, good, that's good,") and having lived all her life upon Kyos had an instinctual fear of the wardens but now she had to be of two minds.

Days before her mother had prepared so she had had to stifle herself then. Kuty stood at the edge of the black labyrinth as her mother prepared the poison and longed to say anything, everything, but couldn't. She had learned to mimic how the humans appeared, their gestures, and their movements and her mother had taught her over again how to shunt her feelings into unused channels of thought. ("Do not cry now. Become as amber

my child, as crystal. Feel the tears ebb. Wait for them, be patient child. Hold them away from you for a time until you are safe and then be free to let them blaze from you again.")

And so, in the dark she learned how to appear afraid or angry or sad while that second skin beneath her own also worked, letting the true feelings bubble beneath, ready in the safety of a later time to be shed. And yet when the tears fell, despite herself, she was feeling it. And now?

"She's shuddering," one of the wardens said to Baligostria.

"Why wouldn't she?" he asked. "I tremble at what she's been through."

And so, the girl was taken from her home to her home again, a human returned to the lands of her people while never being able to see her lands again.

Cala was firing at the stones.

There was a row of obelisks about the edges of Calranus and the young woman was taking aim and with a flick of her wrist a small dagger would go flying. In her mind's eye, (she closed her eyes less than a second after the blade was thrown,) she imagined the exact trajectory. She could see the bronze-gold hilt spinning like the orbits of Kallar and Lehri about the world of her home. If she focused ever so tightly, she'd even imagine the blade would twist silver like Kallar or become a crimson tear like Lehri and the stone obelisks would bend to becoming the night herself.

Then she'd open her eyes and the blade would be exactly where she wished it to be and with a minor sigh she'd go over and pick up the blade again.

Small leaf-shaped knives they were, handles of bright bronze along with the hilt, and after Cala picked up the last one, she turned her attention back to the dark lands of her visit.

The wardens saw the land beyond the River Seel as

simply a furtherance of their task. No kyrarai had reached the shores for long in thousands of years and yet the wardens had never taken the lands here for their own. They patrolled, they walked, they marched but they never dwelled for long and never desired to.

And why not?

She gazed upon vast plains, tall grey-bright grass swaying and sometimes caught them singing one to another. And the city was small for the wardens but the building materials were astonishing. Cala had seen wardens pluck the wreck and ruin of a far mountain and simply carry it to Bursania to be used in furtherance of their walls. But Calranus? Untouched, a museum meant for no one to reveal the glory of nothing sacred.

She sighed and continued her target practice.

Baligostria clutched the child to him as they came upon the black city. There were two others but so far inland they could not be seen. The others lingered now but even as they did, he caught small signs of panic in their glances and their eyes. They had not moved in so long and they were standing beyond the river and every fibre of their being told them to move, to continue the patrol, to seek the higher lands beyond the black city, to keep the march, to never give up . . . and their quarry was dead and the only token of her existence was this wayward child.

It wasn't fair. Such things simply shouldn't have happened.

Cala watched as the great giant approached. The wardens had lingered along the shore, a mountain range in miniature made in the likeness of flesh . . . and tears? She picked her knives from the dull earth and began to walk. Of course, it would take a bit of time but the wardens were fixed upon the spot and as she glanced across the water she saw why.

Baligostria was returning.

Cala had been with them when the kyrarai rose and fell.

Hard to miss really.

First was the rain. It had misted across both sides of the water and a few of the older wardens recalled when the demons boasted of such power. Of course, thought Cala, their weather control technology had been mostly obliterated after the war but it was possible after so long a few pieces had been repaired, certainly not enough to cause any trouble but she was hardly a fan of the rain. Assuming the kyrarai were even responsible for it.

Then the clouds parted as if upon some sorcerous cue and the sounds of a crying girl and the kyrarai taken to flight. Then the fall and for the first time in forever a warden strode forward with the attention of touching the farther shore.

Cala watched and then went back to her practice. It was not a lack of empathy or interest on her part. But she had journeyed halfway across Candra to visit the dark lands of the kyrarai and in this moment neither their lives nor deaths mattered much to her.

After all, so long as the kyrarai lived Kyos was barred her, so long as one remained the last refuge of the ancient overlords was out of Cala's grasp. But now though the kyrarai were dead she still would most likely be unable to cross, considering the look of abject awe in their jailors' eyes.

All she could observe would be ruins and no more. She bore witness to the ending of the line and scould at least boast of that but unlike wardens, her identity did not rest or end with them.

"I wonder what they're going to do now?" she asked herself as she aimed an obelisk which was stronger than iron-stone, hit her mark, and noticed yet again no damage shown.

As if she had actually been trying.

Of course, there was the girl.

She went to pick up the blades and gazed across at the towered head of the chief warden. A human, (not her people but

not bad people either,) had bore witness to the last days of the dying breed. The wardens would either quarantine her forever or make her an object of worship. Or both.

But what would she do?

She slowly strode back to where she'd first laid eyes on where the last kyrarai fell.

Kuty reached the black city of Calranus finally, her mind split into two directions. First was the outward subtle calm as if with each step Baligostria gained her trust. But within she was panicking more and more, each footfall a grim reminder of what befell so many of her kind.

("How had he died?" she had asked her mother, speaking of her father.

"The hand of a warden reached out and crushed him," she replied.)

Were these the hands of the warden that had killed her father? Could not tell, her mother had not seen whose hand killed him, only knew by the evidence of the body.

Given time her mind jotted down these possibilities but had to maintain her illusion, her panic ebbing to calm acceptance.

Freedom from the beast.

Then she saw the strange one.

Not a warden. This one wore oddly grey garments and leather boots instead of bare feet. It was a woman Kuty knew but only because she seemed so like herself, except the hair was not dark, (could hair be something other than dark or moss-coloured?) but golden as the sun and she was not the size of a warden. This was no mountain. This seemed an echo of herself.

"Hey! Set her down here! Here!" the woman screamed and pointed to the ground. The jailor faced the small being and nodded and obeyed. *Who would speak to a warden like this without death greeting their bones?* Kuty asked. And then she realized she was astonished and more than this her face and features matched

the thoughts within.

And she was lowered, world shrinking now, she was no longer able to see the far plains nor the Serpent Mountains in the distance, now only the tops of black towers, now the great royal roads of nameless kings, and now face to face with a woman, with oddly pointed ears.

She stared into strange blue-green eyes and a small pouting mouth and quite without thinking Kuty wrapped her arms around the strange woman's neck and wouldn't let go. Eyes closed she seemed frozen in the moment.

Baligostria was about to reach down when Cala looked up and shut her left eye. An old sign the slave races used which meant all clear, a sign most couldn't remember anymore.

But the wardens could.

They'd never allow themselves to forget.

All clear. The strange woman was not hurting Cala, was probably just jolted by the emotions of seeing an almost friendly face. Baligostria turned to the others and all turned to the isle. The funeral pyre could be clearly seen by now, a small rivulet of heat and smoke coming from the topmost tower.

It was over, the wardens had won, fulfilling their purpose of defending all Candra from the threat of the storm-demons.

So now what was left for them?

"What is your name?"

It took close to one-sixteenth day before the strange girl released Cala's form. She had to be pried gently from the young woman but Cala was patient with that last tenuous grasp of the vanished ones.

There in the black city as Kuty came back to her senses she realized she had been clutching at this strange woman, an unconscious act as if the thought of finding some mirror image had all but shattered her carefully laid plans.

No long spiel, no questioning the wardens might have

had, no standing in the city-fortress of her people misdirecting them with stories of a casual brutality carried out by a monster who in truth she cared for more than life or death.

No peering face from above, no hooked noses bent down nor eyes great as small yellow lakes taking in each aspect of her form. Instead, a woman whose graceful features echoed her own, and suddenly the great divide between herself and herself subtly closed.

If she was aware of it, she would have realized her attraction to Cala instantly, but despite all her mother had taught her she'd never taught her this. Had Arlis realized it, she'd never known such thoughts herself. Ibasuqe in his death had lingered in her mind not as some tragedy but a simple means to an end. No malice in the thought but no devotion either.

Yet her final thought had been her daughter.

And Kuty was discovering there was more to life than this.

"My name is Kuty Hugut," she said and then almost stopped herself. Hugut had never been mentioned, was not even a portion of her name. It was some ghost of a story, some almost lost name of a lover doomed to betrayal she had glimpsed once along an almost smoothed wall.

Why have I given such a name? she asked herself. But it hardly mattered now.

"My name is Cala," the strange woman said and the wardens clustered round and gazing up Kuty tried to gain some solace in the clicking-into-place of their positions as they were supposed to be where her mother said. Cala had ruined it though. But ruined was not the word Kuty had intended.

"You are among friends," the young woman said, gazing upward at the wardens in their midst, "and you are safe."

"Safe," Kuty echoed and gazed down at the ground, her heart suddenly beating wildly, her mind racing as she tried to cool herself. Had Cala noticed she pretended she had not.

"I am safe," but as an afterthought in her mind, she replied, *in the presence of my enemies.*

She huddled into herself and sat upon the shore. In the distance, the giants were at work. Now that her mother was dead, they were finally given free rein to explore the apogee of their obsession.

It had always lingered out of reach, the isle of Kyos, left tantalizingly away from them and ever in their thoughts. The lingering fear of disturbing their condemned prey meant the giants never ventured there save in thoughts or dreams. They couldn't. It would be as if a man were promised paradise and so long as the promise held, he'd keep putting forward the date of his rapture, expectant in the hope of a perfect end but so long as he imagined it, he'd never reach the end.

The thought alone sustained.

Now the dream was ended and paradise was at hand.

In the empty city of the end, Baligostria strode. He crossed the great royal road forged in the dark time before and for a moment, just a moment, was content. All they had done to his kind, all the lingering terror of their nightmare when all of Candra's northern lands were their abomination, their accursed plaything, had been meted out here in punishment toward each of them.

A hundred generations were spent making them live with the actions of their predecessors, seeing the far shore and knowing far Calranus was still *almost* within reach as former slaves gathered, watched, and let *linger* the dwindling fire of their former tormentors.

And now the last was dead.

He marvelled in his triumph at seeing the end.

Then he wept and wept and wept and simply couldn't stop.

And Kuty sat and watched and marvelled at her loss, and

his, and reached into her garments and drew forth the second jewel her father had died in acquiring, the dull silver ring her mother gave her and the small splinter of grey behind her ear. Her entire people's legacy was now reduced to three small slivers of metal and stone caught in an alien hand.

And suddenly her tears flowed easily in echo to his own.

They had questions of course. She expected this and now finally her part was allowed to be played uninterrupted. After a time of mourning the giants still had their questions.

What was the monster like? What had happened to her father and mother? Where were they buried, or had the monster eaten them?

What had she learned about the storm-demons, what arcane knowledge, what cursed secrets had let slip in the final days?

And she answered them, staring upward at the faces bent down and arrayed against her as the obelisks of her people dimmed in the twilight and the silver and scarlet slowly ascended the sky.

The monster was evil. Her parents were dead. The monster had eaten them, (she could have said they were buried or burnt but she sensed what her audience expected her to say, all save the woman beside her whose thoughts she could not portend.)

She knew some of the language, (she cursed herself for her new name for it was a kyrarai name and the wardens might have wondered why storm-demons would give a slave this portion of themselves, then realized they would no more know a kyrarai name than the name of the kyrarais' first world,) and she knew a bit of their history, what little the monster had told her.

Raised apart from the rest of her kind she had been taught that the monsters had once ruled the northern lands and been gracious lords who built whole races of beings, whole cloth. Like

the giants for example. And that the monsters had been, under the leadership of Darsyap-Igel the most powerful beings who ever lived until a rebellion occurred and they had been struck down by a plague.

This plague meant they could no longer bear children as they had and at the same time the giants emerged, stronger, more cruel, and then scoured them from Candra, forcing them to linger on a small piece of ground while Darsyap-Igel their king was torn limb from limb and forced to wait upon the far shore to die for his sins in leading his people to their failure.

And that was what the monster told her about why monsters dwelled on Kyos Isle

Baligostria sat by one of the black galleries and pondered all this in his heart. So even after so long, the monsters pretended they were not responsible for their fate. They could not see what they had done. He was content, if briefly, then rose, the ground staggering at his movements.

"What more do you want to know?" Kuty asked.

"What do you feel about us?" He said, his back turned, the thunder of his words shaking a little the obelisks gathered about.

"She called you the most dangerous things in Candra who would have killed anyone who escaped Kyos Isle, who would tear apart the world if one of the evil ones escaped."

"And am I such a thing to you?" he asked, the great dark continent of his back casting a deeper shadow as Kallar and Lehri came into the skies overhead.

"I don't know," Kuty replied, "am I an enemy of yours?"

He turned gazing yellow lakes of eyes at her then spoke, his words taking time since they began above the tall spires of Calranus.

"No," he said simply, "you are no enemy of ours. I should take you with us to Bursania or Janderia myself, to one of the warden cities to the south but I do not know enough about humans. As I understand it some of you are like this and some

appear like us," he meant gender she realized, remembering that the giants were grown like great trees though they seemed of flesh, "and I would not risk losing one as you. But we are fortunate for Cala is here," at her name the young woman bowed, "and she has promised to take you south. With a few of us as protectorate taking to the outer edges of your walk you should reach Bursania in three days. And then with her guidance you shall be made comfortable in our city, where you shall linger. Always."

"I am honoured to be accepted into the city of my master's enemies," she lied.

And Cala watched her closely and said not a word.

But later in the night as all slept Cala began to sing. She strode to the edge of the black city between stone and the sea of grass and she began to sing a slaves' song of their captivity.

"This milk soft moon smooth wine of mine
the demons stole my flesh and all my bones
they stole with them, and in mourning came
the night and by the morning's light
what was left of me?"

She paused to stare at the great swelling bodies of the giants as they stood motionless about her, seeming to rest though they never slept, and the young woman clutching a grey garment against herself then turned toward them sadly, wondering whose voice had caught her own, the giants, Kuty or the kyrarai as the grass sang with her a crooked voice so like her own.

Chapter 3
Like the song says, but I wrote the song

The aceans have no home, so the legends say. The centipede princes swarm from world to world seeking after a scent like some black decaying echo of what might the dream of their former realm have been along black winds between the worlds that guide them. If fortunate those who deal with the great golden-bodied aceans can be given wealth or youth if they but provide a simple thing; a clue to where the aceans' treasured desires lay. It does not matter if the knowledge be true or false.

Calranus fled away by now as if it strode away.

They crossed the River Seel, crossed into countries of light from out the dark lands as the wardens called them, and Cala and Kuty walked for three-sixteenth of the day when they desired to stop.

Three of the wardens marched about them moving like great solitary mountains mirroring each step of their own. Equalled between reverence at her knowledge and terror that some small scrap of a living being from Kyos stepped across the land the three lacked Baligostria's will to even make eye contact with the slave girl, tortured by the beast.

But Cala had no such difficulties.

"So, what did you do on Kyos?" she asked nonchalantly. "How did you survive?"

"I think the storm-demon required company, being the last of its kind so I became like a surrogate daughter to it," *keep the lie close to the truth and you'll be fine* she thought to herself, "someone who could share her thoughts about the old times."

"I see. Makes sense. So why did she hurt you? I was told they heard you screaming but I don't see any bruises."

"She had things that never left a bruise when she felt I

made a mistake."

"And did you err often?"

"Often enough. What of you? What sort of thing are you?"

"Ah, well, that's a long story." They sat about the grasslands as tall reeds whipped forward and back while the three wardens stood motionless, waiting for their cargo to set sail again south. "I was born in the Valari Forest. Do you know what a forest is?"

Kuty shook her head. *No.*

"It's a sea of trees, the last sea of trees in all Candra. It stretches as far as all the dark lands of the north and a good portion of the isles and it is where I was born."

"Why did you leave?"

"It was an incredibly dull place. My people are called elves, do you know what that word means?"

"No, the storm-demon mentioned the term but I never knew what she meant by it."

"It means 'scholar' in the old tongue because that's what we were. There is a place far from here called Myr, created by Byrgirou, the first of the arisai. Do you know what an arisai is?"

"No."

"There is so much you don't know then. Well, he made the first worlds and his children made more. And Myr, his first creation were great oceans of blue desert, and the peoples there were called dreamers. We'd call them storytellers here.

"Well," she turned to look at the sky then kept talking, "some of these storytellers wished to do rather than say, wished to experience rather than pretend and they scattered just as the kyrarai scattered and like the kyrarai my people came here.

"We didn't look like this at first. We were blue, strange thought, but we changed and when we changed, we settled in the great forest. At first, we experienced, felt, and did, once we scattered ourselves across Candra but I think some older instinct hit us when the kyrarai attacked because besides myself none of

the elves have left the forests of Valari in thousands of years. Not since the elves retreated into the sea of trees during the conquest of Candra."

"You left though."

"Yes, well, the others think me quite mad. They consider me a bane upon their kind. I am no longer even considered elf but something else."

"Elfsbane?" Kuty asked. Cala smiled.

"Cala Elfsbane, an apt term. Like I said elf means 'scholar' but one can't be a scholar if one learns nothing. My people stopped learning and retreated inward and I couldn't. To live up to the name I had to venture out."

"A name your people reject you having."

"Isn't that always the way? Tell me, do you wish to spend the rest of your life in the company of the wardens?"

"No. But from Bursania perhaps I can head west, maybe go to the land of my birth. Have you met many humans?"

"A few. There is a city called Pyral where the humans congregate. It is the last human city in all creation."

Kuty marvelled at this.

"What do you mean?"

"The humans, like my people, once scattered themselves a long time ago. There were places where the humans went. There are even stories they tell of some place called . . . dirt, or sand, or perhaps clay where they originated from. Though it wasn't all dirt or sand, had water too, and trees, and mountains. Anyway, the humans scattered but there was a war, some disaster, perhaps the same ruination that felled the kyrarais' world. And in the wake of that ruination, the humans died. You are a rarity Kuty Hugut. You are one of the last thousand humans left in all creation still alive."

"I hadn't known that," she said. Nor of course, had her mother. In the time before humanity numbered in their millions, even here on Candra. So, the kyrarari were not the only people in

decline. “Are there others like this, dying races?”

“Some. A few. Mind you humans are not dying exactly. There are a thousand and I can’t know for sure, perhaps some small corner out between the stars a few linger there. But even a thousand is enough and to tell a human in Pyral theirs is a dying race he’d spit in your eye. Of course, since the time of the Shadow Planet we don’t know how many places were emptied, or peoples lost.”

Kuty rose.

“I think that’s enough for now. Why don’t we keep walking?”

“Yes, of course.” *Stupid, stupid girl,* Cala thought to herself as she rose also. *The poor child’s been torn to another land and what do I do? I fill her head with stories of other planets and dying places and peoples and how would she know anything about humans or the Shadow Planet or the arisai? My people know no more than she and they were not exiled to some bleak corner of Candra. “*Do me a favour,” Cala said.

“What?”

“Forget about most of what I said. It’s not important. Just keep your mind on this. You don’t have to go to Bursania. I’m heading west and I think perhaps you’re safer with me. Besides I doubt you know anything important about the kyrarai, about where they came from or what they were even like.”

“Cala Elfsbane,” Kuty said, “that is the truest thing anyone has ever said about me.”

And so, the five began on their way again.

Etanrae, Miaognaigh and Belylforium strode about the edges of the pair. Of course, neither elf nor human could properly pronounce their names. Strange to imagine that, Etanrae thought as he walked. For all their wisdom they couldn’t fathom a single name or know its meaning or intent. It was as if all they saw were

not even a sliver of clay buried underneath.

And here he was standing before their eyes.

Stop.

He raised an arm and the other two paused and the pair ground-close did likewise.

He sniffed the air. He turned his moss-shrouded head back, his yellow lake eyes piercing beyond the river but only a dimmer haze could he see. And yet. What was that? Not arlgith. The weapons of the storm-demons dwelled in the Shannix Hills and never ventured forth. Jalal? Here? No, they were to the west and even a phalanx of them would not so much as scratch the outer membrane of his eye nor cause this small shiver of panic in him.

Monster? Dead. Human? No.

So, what was he smelling then?

Arisai.

He mouthed the word slowly and Cala caught the semblance of the tone.

"Arisai?" she asked. He nodded. It was afar off beyond the river but he knew that scent. An arisai was on Candra now.

And suddenly the warden was torn. Return to the northern lands to see the last of them or lead the young girl home, his home not her own? How long had it been since one of them came to Candra? He couldn't tell. Surely the last time had been before the conquest. Surely.

"We must turn back," he said. It was an unconscious thought echoed in unconscious words. Suddenly all thought beyond returning ebbed away. He turned about-face and the others did likewise. Without thinking he went to scoop the pair of them up. Cala lunged to her left, the brown leather of her armour scourging against a stone as fingers six times her length went burrowing into the earth making long furrows then fled upward back into the sky.

And beneath her body was Kuty's own.

Without knowing if he caught the pair or not the giants strode by, their every thought subsumed.

"And we're next," Cala realized, speaking to herself as the three wardens slowly vanished, becoming haze far to the north.

Without speaking she drew forth a dagger from its sheath and sliced the palm of her hand, did likewise to Kuty, and without another word the pair began to run.

Byrgirou strode the city of the end of things and was not content. Four lion's legs prowled the emptied city and down in the black maze, he made his investigation. *Donegal* he whispered occasionally. Or *Yyaalis.* But if he were aware of the mantra, he uttered silently he knew it not. It was the reverberations of a clock-strike pounding slowly at his heart.

Great bat wings bent in the low chambers as he felt the thunder-rumble of drums, footsteps of the wardens overhead, and were he afraid of death would have feared the collapse of the lower labyrinth. But death held no terror for him.

Here. The girl slept here. He prowled the room, licked at pools of scent, small perfume-etched objects the girl used. And for a subconscious moment, he became aware of something none could have known. He sensed the familial threads of her flesh mirror-echoing her mother's own. If he had paid closer attention would have hit upon the thought immediately but he didn't.

Or rather a portion of him did not.

Then he strode to the mother's room.

Broad canopied spaces, wider, not the cramped below but a room with a view of the far harbour and the black city. Each day from a bed of white soft-stone she could watch the wardens watching her as she woke.

Clever. He did not know who was more captivated, the jailors or the prisoner.

But where was the ring?

"You can't keep doing this to yourself," Donegal said

suddenly and the great head turned to see a young being standing before him unlike anything on Candra. Luminescent body, bodies, blending and melting into each other, soft rupturing of skin, yellow-white flesh enmeshed with blue and red circular spots which could have been eyes. Or mouths.

This ghost of an arisai had taken the shape of his own creation. But it was not Donegal he knew.

He was staring at himself.

Suddenly a kyrarai came into view. Ah, so now his dark reflection was appearing as she had wished, in the guise of her creation. Suddenly great bat wings shook out the sun and six eyes stared at him in pity for the dead.

"Go away," Byrgirou said and on the farther shore, Baligostria heard the words but did not understand their meaning or intent. And the form melted like ice in a summer storm.

It was not here. The ring of Korgius should have been upon the isle and when the last kyrarai died should have lingered here. All the pinpoint focus of his rigid mind gravitated to this logical truth.

You could have come before, the shadow whispered.

No, I could never have come before to watch the last shred of Yyaalis' creation tatter-ruined like this. It was better I waited. The tears would have started flowing and wouldn't have ever stopped.

In a flash, he crossed the room, the wall, the water, and stood before the warden.

"You said there was a girl?"

"Yes, a slave girl the storm-demon had. I took her here myself and now she is heading south."

"Not for long. I am drawing back everyone who left. Just in case."

"In case Byrgirou?"

"By any chance did you see if the girl was wearing a ring? It would be grey silver, dull, like cold stars?"

"No, but," rising to full height, "it would be hard to fathom anything from where I see the world."

True indeed, the arisai thought. *The farther one is from creation the harder it is to see any created thing.*

Cala felt the first tremor but moved on. So did Kuty. The arisai. Strange, she hadn't even heard of them save as legend. For creators, they were surprisingly low-key. No temples were dedicated to their worship, no acolytes, no fights to the death, no crusades.

One did not raise temples or statues to painters or poets. If creation was their nature creation was also how they sought their reverence and nothing more. And the arisai's method of creation allowed so much room to grow. In a flash, they appeared to have made the world but in making the world they first created time and so first created history.

They appeared at what was the dawn of time but had already filled in the gaps, the corners, the unseen places before. No different than any storyteller who begins their tale with a pair of beings running and then gradually draws back more and more of the world as if the world had always been as if the pair had always been running to somewhere instead of merely running.

Cala and Kuty ran, to where they did not know. Yet.

Across fields, they ran and let pain linger in their bones.

"Why are we fleeing?" Kuty asked.

"Because I don't like being called to heel, especially not like this!" *It wasn't fair,* she thought to herself. Arisai didn't do this usually. Almost never. She had seen it in the warden's eyes, being summoned like a child by its parent. The indignity of it. But there was another reason, the larger reason she wasn't saying.

Arisai didn't do this because it violated their sense of creation. Forcing a being to move was taboo like a parent erasing portions of their own child. It was blasphemous and any being who held no terror in violating its own nature held no terror in

violating the natures of others.

So, Cala ran and Kuty ran with her.

Trying to outrun a god.

The three returned. They revealed the pair were somewhere to the south. Why had they not tried harder? All thoughts were focused upon the voice, Etanrae said. The lovely voice.

"They have returned, release them now."

Byrgirou imagined burning Baligostria, feeling this driving hate in being told anything. The shuddering thought of this being even raising his voice . . . and a darker shadow whispered in his ear, *do as he says now.*

And Byrgirou did. He freed the three and Baligostria nodded and the arisai grew tense.

"Why have they not also returned?" he asked.

"Well," Baligostria said, "their legs are smaller than our own. I imagine it might take them a little while longer."

Burn, burn, burn, burn, stop, stop, ***stop.*** The shadow slowed and slurred its speech, a mocking tone, as suddenly Byrgirou was not standing in the black city but lying atop a pile of treasure and four leonine creatures nestled about him. Female. Not arisai, but close.

Close enough? the shadow asked, taking the form of one of the golden lionesses.

And he imagined the scent of soft smooth wine and the laughter of these women and the slow embrace of each of them and his heart cooled at last . . .

"Yes, of course," the stoic-faced god said, reluctant god, and he turned to face the sea darkening in echo of his own. "We should take their path then."

"Surely you could stride across to Bursania if you wished Byrgirou. It would be the easier route since they are due there. If you release your hold they would travel south as they should. If

do you nothing but wait all will fall into your grasp."

"Of course," the oddly monotonous tone of the arisai's voice hummed in the air, "you are right. I was . . . in haste."

"Might I ask, why concern yourself with a ring?"

"Yyaalis, my daughter forged the ring and gave it to her first creation. I learned the ring could provide something we have looked for a long, long time."

"And what is that I might ask?"

"Perfection."

And the corin manticore was gone.

Baligostria pondered the strange words and then gazed down. While the arisai spoke a talon had been at work. It dug into the black stone and wrote something unconscious and unknowingly.

The message read: *The last of the kyrarai is not dead. She is the human girl Kuty. Pursue her. I would if I were you.*

Taken aback the great giant roared and before he even knew it could not tell if he roared in rage or pleasure that one still lived. And so, leading the march the giants headed south.

"It's stopped," Cala said.

"Good," Kuty replied. They had run for some time with a subtle humming in their ears. "Shall we continue our route to Bursania?"

"No, no I don't think so. Something's wrong and I don't want to follow the old plan. We should circle the two cities and head south then west, past the edge of the Serpent Mountains."

"I was hoping to go west, but why?"

Day was starting to lose herself.

"Like I said, I don't like being brought to heel."

And so, the pair turned further east, heading toward the Shannix Hills, the only route south the wardens would not intend. And once or twice Kuty reached into her garments and felt the cool skin of an old ring, as night fell.

Chapter 4
The serpent cross

Zharus was created from stone, did you know that? The one who made the ground, the oceans, and the barren plains chose stone and only stone—no other created thing. And the peoples of Zharus are serpents, some striding with legs, others upon great muscular tails, and in their coverned cities of stone some sleep, some wake, some weep.

But even then, they weep but stone.

Byrgirou waited. He had crossed the threshold of the giants' city and strode the royal road where great lumbering footfalls shook almost silently the ground. Here, he waited for the girl and the woman. He could do little else.

Of course, had he wished he could have stretched forth a limb, a thought, and reached out into the grasslands beyond and searched for them. He said as much to Baligostria before departing. With but a gesture he should have scoured the broad lands and found them in an instant.

Except he couldn't.

He had only claimed the wardens due to their size, great boulders in a sea of grass, but the girl and woman he could no more see than a giant could have seen the ring. No more than he could see the ring of which he sought.

But he dared not say such things.

Once, long before he truly could have done anything, built a continent with each footfall almost silently shaking the ground, but now he was the last, and his power ebbed day by day. As sea foam, he would dissolve along the breakers of eternity and be gone.

This he knew and this he knew he could not reveal to them.

He stumbled in the dark between, meditating upon his

own face of the deep, attempting to bridge the intangible silence with the untellable shadows that groped like lapping dogs in the dark.

For him.

For he, as they before, had sought to found Ledhia, and the longer he sought this perfect creation the more his own flesh and soul fled from him.

"Are you hungry?"

A giant bent down to the reluctant god and offered some food, from the smell of it a boar perhaps. Ah yes Yyaalis loved them, the bristle of their hide, their tusks . . . suddenly he was there again on Zanaan amid the kyrarai partly fashioned in the guise of her favourites.

And so many other favourites etched into their form . . .

"Thank you, but," a gazelle appeared, dead at his feet and he bent to its throat but not before adding, "this will suffice."

The giant rose and went on his way.

This was how he had sustained himself. Small acts of creation, a half-finished world here, an almost-made isle of stone in a sea of night there.

A gazelle brought to creation already dead.

He eyed the flank. Odd stripes roiled down the body and the horns were curled like mollusks one of his children had created. The eyes were silver-stained and he remembered which of his sons enjoyed giving all his creations such quicksilver eyes.

He closed his own then, the great pools of white which were the merest membrane of a last god's sense and ate. As the body was devoured, he grew stronger but only because with each mouthful more of the creature was added to being.

A leg removed? A leg restored. Is the flank ripped open? The flank is made stronger. Suddenly without realizing it, he drew up his breath and in a flash, the gazelle sprinted upon her legs and in gaining the momentum of being, raced the great grey road and was gone.

Could he have stopped her? No. Even with her sustaining him as he reached out his mind to call her back, she was gone. Likewise, where the two women fled, he could not trace them with his thoughts anymore.

It's not too late, a voice in his head whispered, *to make more than this. Throw away that stupid dream of yours. Please. It's not too late.*

"The ring," he said, and a few giants stared down at the great smear of the great red lion stolidly standing in the middle of the road, "the ring is what I'll need to make this better. To make amends."

And had the giants noticed they would have seen a smear of oil shift its weight under the sad god's body then fade like foam upon the rocky reaches of the world.

"Welcome to the Shannix Hills!" Cala proudly exclaimed.

They had avoided Bursania and Janderia by moving closer to the sea. The hills occupied a portion of the most easterly part of Candra and were an utter contrast to all that Kuty had known. They were unlike the broad lands, the island, unlike even the far mountains.

The hills rolled like serpent coils up and down, smoothed mounds of earth circling each other utterly. It was impossible to tell where one edge ended and another began because the hills sloped into each other, or a few did, or none perhaps it was some illusion. There did seem something utterly unreal about the place.

And in the far distance, an equally unreal sight greeted the pair of them. Due to the nature of the eastern lands, they could see in almost all directions and far to the northwest Bursania loomed. Cala had been there. She had wandered beyond the thousand-foot-thick walls and had scurried under a gate large enough to let a mountain through. The streets extended so far it seemed the other side of a continent, each row of buildings the thick boundaries of fortified countries.

And the city was so unadorned. It seemed a solid block of stone, a mass of iron rolled and etched into the earth, unmovable. As if grown. As if a grey blossoming river of iron had frozen solid amid the grass.

"Let's get in," Cala said and so the pair of them slipped between two grey hills, though they had nothing to fear. Byrgirou waited.

"Have you been here before?" Kuty asked. For some reason, she was starting to notice more the longer she was with Cala. Out on the walk she had noticed the grass and how it bent and asked her what the meaning of this was, how the grass turned and twisted this way and that.

"They're just looking at you," Cala said, then smiled and added, "Or maybe it's the wind."

"Wind?" Kuty asked.

Since then, she had started to notice more. The plan after all had involved Kuty pretending to be somewhat ignorant. But she always assumed her mother taught her everything she knew or everything worth knowing.

She knew about the history of the kyrarai and most of the technology and some of the other lands but none of the smaller details like wind or the names of plants. Or feelings.

Amid the hills where small vines grew and strange red flowers burst, she started asking, "Have you been here before?" But what she meant was, "Do you know what this is?"

"I was never here personally but that there is a scarlet-shower."

"Why it's called. . ." Before she could finish her sentence one of the five-pointed flowers exploded, covering her in a thin mist of red. "Never mind," she said.

Cala smiled and sat by a stone.

Kuty felt small particles of crimson clinging to her face and tried to wipe them off but couldn't. Seen from the right angle

it appeared as if she was smeared by a thin layer of ochre or fur, appearing less human perhaps, or more.

"Why did it do that?" she asked.

"Scarlet showers burst when they sense body heat from living organisms. It's their nature, they can't help it, and when they do, they release those spores which will eventually fall off and litter the ground somewhere else. Far away. To create life." "What happens to the flower though?" Kuty turned to see the blossom had not simply exploded but withered on a vine. Soon nothing was left but an almost charred wreck. "Seems kind of sad," she said.

"Yeah, well if it doesn't die nothing gets created either. Nothing lives forever," Cala said, rising, "and nothing ever should."

Sobered by the words the pair went on their way as the vines shuddered at the passing of a once familiar thing.

The arlgith sensed them moving amid the vines. Green thorn-laced cacophonies were the floor of the world littered occasionally by an animal but these were something else. Warmer. No. Wrong word, but why . . . ah yes, of course. Two legs. Instead of slinking-close-to-the-ground-things, these were like white-hot suns, apparent and obvious, moving about haphazardly. Creating chaos. Making mistakes with each step.

Curiouser and curiouser, it thought.

Perhaps I should introduce myself, it said.

And so, it did.

Cala felt the trembling green vines shudder and stopped.

Kuty was absorbed in noticing a raindrop on a thorn. *Odd, why hadn't I noticed this before? I had always just assumed all the clouds and rains were my mother's or mine.*

Without looking up she asked, "What is it?"

"Let's move back."

But it was too late by then.

Some of the vines were not green Cala realized but luminescent, like skin the lightning washed through. She had her back to Kuty and Kuty instinctively reached for the small splinter of metal by her ear, *do I use it? Now? Here? Mother said it was only to be used in an emergency, but . . .*

"What is it?" she asked, echoing her words again.

"Arlgith," Cala said and drew a golden-hilted knife.

Behind the vines, a shape grew taunt, rounded, but was no hill nor large enough to be one. The 'vines' were tendrils cast upward off its skin. They snaked between the true vines but the flowers did not rupture in its presence for it was cold as stone.

Small blue dots and red appeared, eyes perhaps, yes, eyes, and there the slit of the mouth was grown, teeth suddenly descending, ascending, spiked jagged like grind-whale teeth only thinner, more needlelike.

"Hello," the monster said.

And Cala's expression quickly became a deep quizzical frown.

"Hi," Cala said slowly and Kuty lowered her arm, gazing over Cala's shoulder at the thing.

"You should not be walking where you do not belong," the form said, as twenty blue dots widened, each one pointed directly at the pair of them.

"No, I imagine we shouldn't, but we had no choice. I am Cala, this is Kuty."

"I am Moglum, or we are Moglum. Is 'we' the right word?"

"I don't know. Is it?" Cala asked.

Small tendrils writhed in a circling maze about the pair.

"It's so hard to tell sometimes if I am me or he is me or she is me. We don't have what you have you see."

"And what is that?"

"Skin like yours." A tendril brushed against Cala's face. "It's soft and yet I can't know your mind by touching you, can't melt together in one embrace. But if I touch one of my kind we dissolve."

"Do you mean us harm?" Kuty asked.

"I don't know what harm is and if I did, I'm not sure I'd know if I was trying to harm, or harmed you accidentally. *Ah yes*, I remember the word, yes *now* I remember though I had quite forgotten it," the mound shifted up and Kuty saw the shape of a warden in the gelatinous mass but it was twisted and she almost screamed, "Yes, so long ago that word was uttered in my thoughts. *Harm*."

It said the word slowly, savouring the sound.

"Why we did do so many harmful things back then? My, how many we ate in the time before, I remember," a face, Kuty's own face was now brought directly before her own save paler and the hair were tendrils with scattered shades of blue and red, "I remember how we would appear as the forms of our enemies, their loved ones, their children, how we'd watch the shimmering terror as they were forced to kill those they loved or themselves and even then the wounds we received did nothing and grief-ruined we devoured their bones. Tell me do you have any weapon stronger than a blade on you? I am just curious and I would like to *know*."

Again, it elongated the sound, reverberating it against the green.

"Yes," Kuty said simply or at least attempted to speak simply through each fibre of being screamed at her to run, "I have the axe of Ieltish-Ayrirh and if you value your life you will leave us be!"

And the arlgith was taken aback. So was Cala.

"A kyrarai axe? You have one of their weapons? *I knew it,"* the arlgith said.

And suddenly the vines slid back, face recoiled back into the mound of flesh, and the form lessened. Suddenly it was only a girl, Kuty staring at herself except the mirror's eyes were nothing but blank emptiness.

"Welcome to the Shannix Hills," the copy said. "You are royally welcomed here."

And with that the copy strode beside them and gestured with a finger that they follow.

And they did.

And the Shannix Hills rolled on and on seemingly forever like the smaller coils of a snake blistering into stone.

Chapter 5
Ships of cloud at the coverned place of sleep

Xylem is a country of golden sand so when the arisai came her feet sunk through the skin of the ground. And the people in their golden robes came round and the one who created them asked where she was.

And she was told by the scarlet-haired children of herself, "You were always here. You never left the sand once. The sand created you." And the leonine god smiled at their lunacy but even so, a tremor touched her heart to imagine perhaps she had not placed her foot upon the ground, perhaps the ground had risen in anticipation of the god which the world itself had made.

And she was afraid just then, as all creation sang.

I don't know who I am anymore.

Kuty walked on as Kuty strode ahead of her. Of course, it was the arlgith but still. It had sensed she had this weapon, (how had she known?), and now not only did it know but Cala knew as well. *Or maybe she thinks I was bluffing. Yes, there it is, I can say I was bluffing.*

But it knew. It strode back into her own shape when it realized she carried such a thing. No, Cala would not assume it was a bluff. And her skills at lying were rapidly dwindling the longer she was separated along this path her mother did not intend.

It was to have been so simple. A few questions only, a few days or seasons in their city and then the march west. Could she perhaps go back, retrace her step? Was it too late . . .?

"It's always too late," the arlgith said.

"I beg your pardon?" Cala asked.

Again, here was something her mother did not intend.

"You spoke of your mother and her path. Questions,

thoughts of a walled city, but it is far too late to retrace your steps, and why would you? Are you not good company to yourself?"

"You're reading my mind," Kuty said. The arlgith turned.

"Or, nothing so crude as that. I can't know your thoughts exactly it would have made one a rather poor weapon after all if they knew what their prey thought. In the time before empathy was a quality few could afford. But I am in your skin, have your shape so I can see your mother, how she must have appeared to you, a tall woman with long hair like yours and delicate hands. I see the path she laid out for you and so I know the path. But no," here the mirror image turned, "I can read your thoughts not at all."

So, I am still safe, Kuty realized, as the rolling hills passed by. *In her mind's eye, my mother is human. Is that how I imagined her then? Is that truly how I imagine myself or was there a time when I was anything more?*

"We have arrived. Welcome to the heart of Moglum."

"And what is Moglum?" Cala asked.

"Moglum is my self, or," the hills shuddered as countless rivers of flesh flowed down coalescing about the three, "my self is part of Moglum."

Of course, Cala understood. *It is a hive.*

We have wandered into an ocean, a multitude of one.

Byrgirou could wait no more. He prowled a time but grew weary of them and so began the hunt himself. Great lithe muscles tore at the ground as he turned, first north then east, then west, the river of iron stone his only boundary sign, the only indication he had moved anywhere at all.

That and the Serpent Mountains far to the west and north.

I should have let them take the path they wished, he realized. *My last chance to draw the ring and I failed to draw an end of things . . .*

"An end of what exactly?" Donegal asked.

"Ah, my shadow," the lion said. The red corin manticore paused upon the plains in the presence of his enemy, in the presence of himself. "Why have you come to plague me again?"

The black smear roiled and rolled then curled upward, taking an outline of another form. The voice was Donegal's, same sibilant rhythm, same laughing tone, and had he not been known as the laughing one who rejoiced in his creation? Others loved the act of making grand things but he had enjoyed each particle of each essence of the smallest gesture he wrought. A world? What was that to him? He marvelled at the building of the smallest bacterium. Or had.

"I thought you would like to know something, my friend."

"And what would you tell me?"

"The girl is no girl. She is kyrarai."

Byrgirou's eyes widened.

"You lie," he said rapidly, his whole breath caught short.

"And how, pray tell, could I lie to you? Hide surely, certainly, but lie? Never."

"When did you know?"

"Her rooms reeked of an older scent. Her mother used flesh-engineering, you remember that, don't you? Yyaalis' children were geniuses at that, and so she made her own offspring human to escape detection."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Why do you seek the ring?"

"I seek the ring to purge myself of you, to ebb you into oblivion. You are the only stain left that prevents Ledhia's creation, and its perfection. I heard slips and snippets of dying stories across corpse-worlds which have led me here now to end you and to begin a new creation. All this I've hardly hidden from you."

A talon flashed before the last god's eyes.

"But you've hidden it from yourself! Yes, you wish to destroy me and think the ring's the prize. Well, let me help you

achieve your end, which is of course my end, by laying bare the obvious clues.

"She is not human, she is kyrarai. She is the last of her kind. She'll not turn to Bursania or Janderia, no she'll go west, past the Serpent Mountains, past the Orsane Plains. Where is she going Byrgirou? Where would the last of the old ones flee?"

"Not among the humans, no, nor the elves, nor the moselantja or the jalal . . . the dwarves at the world's edge."

"*Why?*" The stained outline almost purred the sound.

"They have ships, ways off-world that do not involve the gates. It's the only way she can possibly go, the only place she can flee too."

"Precisely. You're hunting in the wrong corner of Candra. Go west. Go west in keeping with the others."

"Others?"

"Well, I let slip a little clue to Baligostria as well. The warden was so despondent, he and his kin. He too is marching, seeking after her. Tell me, if he gets to her what will happen, especially now that you have used the lion's share of your strength?"

"He'll kill her."

"And I dare say an enraged warden might be . . . well, can you even fly?"

Glancing back at his wings knew he could not. Each day his strength ebbed, each day a subtle portion of him was gone. He would dissolve like sea foam on a storm breeze and no one would even notice. Once an arisai died, once the last of his kind died all thought of them would vanish from the universe.

Save as stories.

The only refuge they'd have would be stories told by their creations taken in memory of forgotten things.

So Byrgirou turned south, racing against the tide while the iron-smooth stone cities raced behind him in his stead. And all the time the shadow kept up with him as mocking laughter

tinged the air, in dread.

"What would you want of us?" Cala asked.

Moglum, the Moglum which was the girl sat upon a smooth stone and was busily whittling pieces of herself. She'd turned an extra arm into a spear, *(does she suspect, does she know what kyrarai even looked like,* Kuty wondered,) and now she was relaxing staring upward at a sky rapidly twilight-tinged.

"You were to answer questions, I heard it along the path you were supposed to take. So, answer them."

"I was to be asked about the city of my home, about my captor . . ."

"Not you Kuty, flesh of my flesh. I refer to your companion. Questions were to be asked and you will answer them."

"I beg your pardon, what have I to do with this? The weapon drew you to save us so you are clearly interested in Kuty. Besides if you want me to answer a question take my form, become me and you will know all that I have known and nothing more."

Nothing more? Kuty asked herself.

"But you are no ordinary being. And I would not take the form of such as you. Tell me, Cala, what do you know of us?"

"You are arlgith, created in the last days of the kyrarai's hold of Candra, bred as their final shock-troops, born without compassion or pity, abandoned here to rot."

"Ah, yes, all true, utterly true, *and utterly false*." The mirrored head jutted forward, the smile unsettling. "Yes, *yes,* we were made as weapons and oh, how much I recall, we recall of those times before, but all this we forget, choose to forget. When dawn arises at the earliest call, when the moons descend and are gone do you know what will happen to us? We will vanish, I will vanish. I will not have this form but will descend with my kind,

all I was obliterated so another will take my place with her own perspective, her own chance to remember or forget."

"Why tell me this?"

"Kinship, one being to another. I would ask the question, the question you fear, and you would answer," A second Kuty appeared out of the sea of flesh, "her, privately, while I can speak with the girl who saw our last creator fall. Go now, please. You must answer truthfully or else we'll know the shape of your deception."

"It'll be alright." And Cala was gone around behind a hill and Kuty was alone with herself. More or less.

"What question must she answer?"

"Not for you to know, last daughter of the storm-demon race."

Kuty staggered but hands reached out, all her own. She was surrounded by several copies then laid by a nearby slope of a rounded hill while the others fled away and only the first copy remained.

"How long have you known?"

"It is a wise parent who knows their child. It is a wiser child who knows their parent. And no, I spoke truly, I could not read your thoughts but I smelt the weapon," Kuty felt the sliver of metal behind her ear, "and despite what history claims such technology could only be wielded by kyrarai or those descended of kyrarai. Considering you lack wings, tail, heads, I must conclude your mother made you human but left just enough of the old self beneath your bones to let you use something from the time before."

"Will you tell Cala?"

"Why would we? Your kind gave us life and existence. Consider it a debt we owe to you and we will say no more. But I would see the weapon if you don't mind."

She drew forth the small splinter, touched it with her thumb and as she did, she gave a small command, muscles

tightening, exerting the exact pressure needed for the weapon to activate.

Suddenly it extended outward, growing, thickening, rectangular plates emerging like crystal, as two thick axe heads blossomed on either side.

"There," Kuty said. "My mother gave me this in case there was ever need. And do I have need, here?"

"As weapon no, nor proof. I imagine you never even saw this before in its glory?"

"No."

"Take a look then, last child."

She placed the grey axe down and stared at it minutely. Each plate seamed carefully to the next like scales growing together, fused. There were runic symbols carved to each face of the axe and a blue glow from the blade's edge which became invisible as she turned to stare at the blade directly.

It was massive, the axe heads spanning beyond the width of her shoulders, the handle more than half the length of her body yet was painlessly easy to lift and she knew despite this the blade was sharp enough to cleave a stone to shards.

"It's beautiful," she said.

"Ancient weapon, seen by many, often the last thing seen in their lives. I can smell the blood of its victims, recall those former times."

"You were there, or some part of you. Tell me truly, what was it like?"

"Death taken form," the arlgith said. "In the last days, so many perished there were diseased carcasses, storm-demon, human, elf, our kind, half the world strewn of corpses then. They, your people, took so much and lost so much of themselves that when the giants strode and tore them apart, they fled and we did nothing to help them. We fled too, knowing what we had done."

"You spoke so well of being a weapon then."

"We were, thousands of years ago, but now? Now we

have the hills and the night and the day and are content. We have forgiven our past child. Weapon or no we would not have killed you."

"Then why the threat, why . . .?"

"Had I spoken as I did would you have revealed what you were?"

No. I don't suppose I would have, Kuty thought to herself.

"So, what happens now?" the young girl asked.

"Cala has answered her question and soon it will be too dark to travel. Stay here and in the morrow, my descendant will rise up, a drop of flesh taken from an ocean of flesh, and lead you out. But first, would you wish to know how you would have seemed had you not been rendered human?"

Without action or speech, the arlgith knew the answer.

The mirror image suddenly changed. Two thick arms ruptured from below where her arms were and her upper arms thickened as well. From each shoulder burst a head, at first human then they changed to those of a boar, bristling tusks rising as the middle head became that of a wolf.

Her feet collapsed to hooves and spindling legs so slender it seemed impossible they'd carry the weight as bat wings emerged and a scorpion's tail blistered upward from the lower back, swaying to and fro above the heads.

"This is what you would have been had you never been changed my child," the copy of the storm-demon said. And in a flash the form melted like rotted sand and even the echo of Kuty was gone. Night had fast approached and the ocean of flesh had gone to sleep again as it had for uncounted centuries.

And Cala appeared and they were alone at last.

"So that is a kyrarai weapon?" she asked. "However, did you get it to work?"

"I think there's something you should know," the last storm-demon said as oceans of flesh at last melted away like ships skimming oblivion along the edges of the sky.

Chapter 6
The corpse gate

Zanaan was a world of plains. There was a great endless plain and upon it were littered cities, circular hives of walls sweeping into the sky. The kyrarai were born there emerging out of the earth fully formed, a billion years of remembrances condensed to an afternoon.

There were knights in those days when the kyrarai were considered honour-bound defenders of their realm. The word 'noble' clung to them as an ancient curse.

And all they were came crashing down when they opened the Corpse Gate and touched upon the Shadow Planet . . .

As for Zanaan? Does a world exist if there is no one to view it, does a city if no eye sees it in uncounted years . . .?

He was dreaming. Byrgirou reclined to the stones of the Serpent Mountains and sleep on rosy fingers claimed him. He hadn't needed sleep before but as the crippling affliction cut more of him away more aspects of the creation clung to him, nor had he hadn't needed to eat till the others to death fled.

In his dreams, he was upon Myr. The blue sand oceans rolled about his feet and the dreamers there made merry sport of his wise words. They spun their stories and these were caught along the edges of his ears then winnowed beneath his skin and so other planets emerged outward from the place, crafted by the singers and the dreamers he had made.

They never knew a thing though or imagined a few strips of words could make or unmake anything.

Then the view distorted and he was upon Zanaan again.

Can a god dream of this? Dare a god dream of this?

The wind a last witness answered him by cooling his scarlet fur in that other tormented place which might no longer exist, save in dreams. And so, he pretended the wind answered

him and in the dream logic of his thoughts slouched toward Kirogia waiting to be born.

The towers and courtyards were all emptied now of everything. Only his shadow remained.

"It is a beautiful day would you not agree?" Donegal asked, or rather the shadow who used the young god's voice.

"The land is emptied and of no place and dead. I would not call it a beautiful day."

The shadow became Donegal then. Blue fur sprouted from black oil reclining on a stone and suddenly the mouth split open, pursing to be born, to become a smile.

"You died," Byrgirou said. "And this is not your world."

"Nor yours old-father and yet your thoughts always linger here." A great paw swept outward toward the nothing of the plains beyond. "This was where you lost your way, where all the others of us lost our way. And you blamed her, and I, for the fall."

Byrgirou turned from the form of his child and stared at the shimmering heat beyond awhile.

"I never blamed them for anything," he lied.

"You did, and I exist because that blame is cancer-wise killing you old-father. Just as it killed all of them. And, sad to say, they wouldn't have wanted you to mourn them like this. But you cling to this dead spot of ground. *Why?*"

And he recalled it and suddenly in the dream-ground uprose the forms of the kyrarai, women with their twin-boar heads, men with their twin wolf-faces and they made duels upon the sand, sailed the sky in ships of clouds then opened the doors between the worlds.

And one of them stumbled into Shadow.

Donegal had made the Shadow Planet. It had no other name. It was but a blackened ember about a star of night and upon these black continents were bacteria, small islands of life huddled where Donegal wandered among them, laughing in pleasure at the songs of their birth. But they were a lethal species,

each granule of them capable of killing by touch.

Though they held no malice in their souls.

A kyrarai came and brushed against an isle of them upon a black stone crag and panicked the small beings sought to prove themselves no threat to these great giants . . .

By making themselves a part of what terrified them so.

A sentient plague in terror reached out and touched one of those unknowing conquering giants and when more appeared more were infected. And before the arisai knew what happened they crossed the Corpse Gate and occupied Zanaan.

He could see them in dream, small spheres of life with slender threads and blue and red eyes floating in the void.

Out into the light they panicked and spread.

So Zanaan had to be sealed. Of course, the Shadow Planet itself should have been sealed had any been aware of it but how does one notice a shadow in a sea of night? A simple accident brought the kyrarai to their midst and a further accident brought to them, the plague.

Shimmering Yyyalis tried to stop the plague but the only way to do so was to kill them, a trillion beings dwelling in the continent of a body whose only crime was trying to prove themselves harmless by causing harm instead.

Blue Donegal also tried to stop the plague, revealing the harm-mistake to them, letting them realize what they were doing, and in their grief, they sought to be carried home.

To become extinct in the place of their birth.

Those kyrarai infected went but by then it was too late and had not a few kyrarai left the homeworld their species would have been seeped in extinction.

Yyaalis watching her creation fall decided to end her existence with their own. She created a plague's echo capable of taking an arisai, a willing murderer, and a willing suicide.

Donegal too wished to die with his creation. He created in himself something else though; he turned his flesh to a shattering,

shuddering sea of his children and in a billion guises failed and fell with them.

And so, the arisai lost two of their children by the merest accident, by the creation of beings who should not have ever touched. And how had the Corpse Gate been opened anyway? None could tell. It was just an accident.

Just some god's mistake.

"You blame them," the shadow said.

"They should have known better than this." In his revery, the kyrarai had dissolved and the plains were emptied again. The plague returned to ghosts; all save the ghost of Donegal.

"How could one prevent the act of creation? It was their nature to create them by the passing shadow of a thought. And how many countries did you create when a storyteller caught your eye or a chance word said? Could you predict each path your thoughts would take or what worlds you'd make before you had?"

"We'll get it right next time," he said.

"Yes, Ledhia, your perfect child, your finest creation. How long have you laboured on it, how long did any of them labour on it, slipping away their strength till there was nothing left of them?"

"We'll get it right next time," he said.

"They tried to set it right and failed, and accepted that. Donegal did not die in rage, pain, or shame. He accepted where his creation led. Yyaalis as well. And you tried so hard afterward when the kyrarai of Candra turned to not make another mistake that you didn't interfere when they turned. You told the arisai to let the kyrarai be because you feared what action you'd take. What you would have done to them. All your thoughts you bent to this."

Suddenly a planet came into view. Blue and green and sloping valleys and perfect rivers and perfect seas. But it wasn't.

Here was a small stone out of place, there was a single rivulet of water that did not turn as he intended and Byrgirou scrambled in his sleep to make the empty world right which had no people in it.

"How does Ledhia differ from Zanaan if there are no people in it?" the shadow asked. "How can you make perfect your creation if there are none to see it?"

And shuddering from his slumber he awoke.

The day opened its mouth and the sun shone. A rivulet of gold streamed into his eyes and Byrgirou tried to marvel at the sun but couldn't for its maker was gone and would not come again.

The Serpent Mountains loomed against his flank and he vaguely imagined climbing the sheer smooth peak but didn't. Instead, all thoughts he directed south, all save the shadow and the dream of fair Ledhia which nestled like a cancer to his breast.

And the shadow was now smiling as young Donegal once had.

"I'll get it right next time," the reluctant god said, to no one in particular. To just himself.

Chapter 7
The bird-feathered mask, the woman underneath it

Tirova is a stone jungle petrified as amber and amid grey vines hardened as bones of ancient beasts, tiger-women slink in the undergrowth, made in the likeness of their creator.

Yet none have ever seen or known their maker. So likewise, their creator never even knew their creation's name. The only thread between was the nature of uncertainty as the stone jungle never shifted form and it was the only aspect of the world perfect in its ignorance.

And if the jungle was given voice to speak what would it say?

Baligostria ran the fields in scorn at himself. He had been deceived by such a simple thing. Kuty was the last storm-demon's daughter. Some portion of them had escaped.

He failed.

Never in his entire life did he feel such anger now. And buried in the heart of his rage he felt something else.

Finally, he felt alive.

No more waiting. No more standing upon a time to come. The evil had escaped and now he the hero emerged and was leading an army to lay claim to the monstrous thing. The fields passed by without barely a whisper of a sound or if they spoke, he heard them not.

All that mattered was that the evil had escaped and he would bring an end to it, finally.

Never had he ever felt so alive.

Kuty awoke to the sound of Cala snoring beside her. The arlgith had retreated into the hills becoming clay but soon, within the first-sixteenth day would emerge a new Moglum so like and unlike the old.

Cala awoke to the sound of Kuty staring at her.

Both opened their eyes inches from the other's face and then hurriedly rose and prepared for the long trek ahead. Of course, the words from the night before still hung in the air. Cala knew. Cala knew what Kuty really was.

Why had I told her this? she asked herself. *What have I done?*

They turned west and soon exited out of the hills and came upon the southern shore. Hard to imagine how quickly time passes when everything one wishes to say is on one's lips, unwilling to be born.

The hills became mirage as they passed out of them and now the rocky reach was their dominion.

She is kyrarai, Cala thought. *Her body is human but she was born from them; their essence is in her. I am standing before the most hated being in all the world and I do not hate her.*
But what is it I feel?

She knows, Kuty thought. *I've told the one truth I was never supposed to tell and now I have no secrets left. I have nothing left inside me. I am not even myself anymore because the woman I was would never have revealed such a thing.*

Cala, what have you done to me?

"We should hurry," Cala said simply.

"I'm sorry," Kuty replied.

They were standing upon the cliffs and all the words of last night haunted them, Cala's first curse at her, her attempt at reconciliation, the arlgith slithering away, a copy of herself last seen blending into the earth beyond, the long slow recall of a hated mythology, realizing Kuty if discovered would be killed.

And Cala not wanting the young woman to die.

And those were the last words she said to Kuty before exhaustion took them and they wound up inches from each other's face. Or closer. Or further away.

Yet there was so much more to say.

"What are you sorry for?" Cala asked.

"What am I sorry for? I'm sorry for telling you, I'm sorry for you hating me, I'm sorry for you doing all this for me. It wasn't supposed to be this way. Why ever did you even come to Calranus? *She had a plan for me* and it's all ruined now and I don't want to see you looking at me with scorn."

"Is that how my eyes look to you?"

Kuty looked and saw no scorn was there.

"What have you done to me!?"

And Cala went to the earth between where she and Kuty stood and sat cross-legged, staring southward at the sun.

"Sit," she said. Kuty did.

Cala didn't look at Kuty, instead she was staring at the blistering sun.

"How much of what you said was true and how much false?" Cala asked, still not staring at the girl.

"All I said last night was true."

"And before when in the wardens' company?"

"True, mostly true, save my origins."

"Whatever am I going to do with you?" the scholar asked. "No, no that isn't the question, never was." She finally turned to look at the girl. "What are you going to do for yourself?"

"I don't understand."

"Knowing what I know I could end you here unless the arlgith slither out to stop me, though I think they won't. Did they know?"

"She knew almost instantly."

"Of course, I might have guessed. But that's not the issue here. The issue is this; what are you going to do for yourself now?"

"Doesn't that depend on your goodwill?"

"No, because my goodwill hasn't changed in the least. If you want, we can still go west, avoid the wardens, reach the Orsane Plains, or beyond. What was your mother's plan?"

"To go west after escaping the wardens, if I could escape their grasp, then eventually head north . . ."

"To the dwarves."

"Yes. A human going off-world would elicit no surprise from them."

"Why leave at all?"

"My mother felt I should seek the stars and go as far from our former captivity as possible, believing anywhere better than what we had known."

"And she couldn't herself because the wardens knew how many of you were alive on Kyos."

"Exactly. That was the plan my mother instructed to me."

"Well, what do you want for yourself?"

"I don't know. Why do you care, knowing what I am?"

Because I love you you idiot that's why, she wanted to say. She wanted to say the strange girl with oddly dark-haunted eyes put something inside her soul, some sliver of remembrance, something the others lost long ago. If two elf lovers had driven east, had come to this crag and one found themselves near death the other would have blandly comforted them, waited for the end, and when it came left the body to rot and then moved on again.

There was no malice in this, nor even a wistful sense of mourning for the dead. Once gone did the vanished matter to them?

But from the time she saw Kuty a stirring began in her, something inarticulate, unfocused, unformed. Was it some lustful longing after? How could something as stupidly simple as a walk bring one to such a thought? And then the night before, Kuty's words and her reveal and Cala could not drive that thought away.

Then imagining those others like herself and if one of them had met Kuty, if any of them had come here they would have killed her without a thought and never concerned

themselves with any feeling whatsoever.

And why?

They wouldn't have answered their own logic, something inarticulate, unfocused, and unformed.

She was an enemy? None of them recalled the times before. She was a danger? A being rendered human on Candra a danger? Ah, she had some cursed weapon, some damnable thing.

But curses didn't exist and Cala was more lethal with her blades than Kuty with her axe. Before that night the girl had probably never even used the weapon once.

More importantly, the question rang in her head if Kuty were somehow injured she couldn't leave the girl behind.

And yet what she said was, "I don't know. I've grown accustomed to your face I guess."

"I thought it was something like that," Kuty replied.

And the two sat staring at the sun as it continued to rise.

"I don't know what I want," Kuty said quietly, "no one has ever asked me that before."

"Well, I'm asking you, what do you want?"

"I want to go as away from Kyos as I can." She turned to Cala at last. "I want to see the lands long denied me. And maybe, just maybe after I've seen them then I will turn north and finally fulfil my mother's wishes. Not before."

"Alright then," Cala stood up, "then we head west as before but not to the dwarves. I know a few paths seldom used, places most will not go and hard to find unless one knows where to look."

And so, the pair continued west.

Baligostria reached the Shannix Hills with the others. He had run all day and night. Wardens never slept and never dreamed. They could labour as long as they wished, their bodies renewing itself by drawing strength from sun and earth.

"They have come here," he said. A luminescent form

appeared before them, slithering from the hills and taking the form of the strange girl.

"Hello," the form said. In noticing the giants and their size the form grew, towering till it was eye to eye with him, and he was the tallest of the giant kind.

"Arlgith," Baligostria said, "I would have words with you."

The girl of pale flesh smiled.

"You seek the daughter of the last storm-demon then?"

"You knew what she was?"

"Hard to conceal such truths from us."

"You let her pass?"

"You let her pass first oh warden of the northern lands, surely if you vouched for her innocence how could weapons crafted to destroy know better?"

"Do not mock me . . ."

A hand was raised.

"I mock none. I merely observe. Curious you have come this far this fast. Is she so important to you then?"

"She is the last."

"No, she is not." Moglum turned her back to the giant and stared upward at the day-bright stars only she could see. "She is hardly the last of her kind."

"There are others, there?" He gazed upward too.

"Of course not, all their kind are dead, and in truth, her kind is dead as well. I touched each sinew of her being oh warden, saw beneath her flesh. Nothing kyrarai is there, no trace beyond the merest fragment of her mother or her origins. She is human, little else. You are seeking a ghost for no reason king of the north."

At the title Baligostria rankled subtly.

"Do not use such titles with me."

"I meant no offense, only storm-demons used titles as that." The arlgith turned to him then. "But they are dead warden.

All dead. Tell me, however, did you know the truth so far removed from the girl?"

"An arisai came and while speaking his talon winnowed in the stone and revealed the truth to us after she fled."

"And you believed him?"

"I had no reason to disbelieve, surely none now knowing it the truth."

"And the arisai did not speak these words but wrote them instead?"

"He did."

Curiouser and curiouser, the arlgith thought to herself.

"What was the god's name?"

"Byrgirou."

"I *see*." Suddenly the words slid back into her newly formed throat. "Well, if I were you, I'd return the way you came. The girl is gone, where we do not know, and Cala is with her, as she should be."

"What has she to do with this?"

"Haven't you figured that out? Ah yes, of course, you are grown not born and though you travel together when die you die alone, barely remembered by one another. So, unlike those two now. *I had forgotten.*" The arlgith turned and strode away, growing smaller with every step. "You are being manipulated, warden. Some arcane truth is bending you to its will. I know not why nor care but know this, the arisai cannot be trusted. When given the chance to stop our masters' will they refrained."

The girl turned back, now the same size as Kuty.

"Do not walk the path they tread upon, drawing you with them in their wake."

And then she dissolved as sea foam might, blending into the grey hills, and was gone.

"How shall we proceed?" a giant asked. One whose name he had forgotten somehow.

Baligostria pondered going back. Surely the weapon was

right. The arlgith had no reason to lie. He doubted he could kill it and his hands had slaughtered beasts who burnt asunder the world in dread. She could have pretended Kuty was here, dared a confrontation, challenged him, and with her thread sliced his head from the rest of him.

Instead, she answered they had gone, meaning they were now no longer under the arlgith's protection and had made no move for or against the warden save the words of warning.

Could be a deception but he knew truth when he tasted it, even in the mouths of his enemies.

They could return home. And yet.

If he returned, what would they return to, northern lands tending endless fields with only the ghosts of past glories to claim, telling those who came after the splendour of keeping watch over an ugly piece of stone cast in a black sea while their quarry dwindled and wailed and railed against the injustice of it, till none of them were left?

And he did not know if the dwindling parties were the storm-demons or the wardens now.

In a generation, his life would be an anachronism, a backward bent piece of machinery ill-suited for the following age. And none would remember his name or the names of his companions. He did not even know his predecessor's name two generations back, only that he had defended the world from the encroaching, all-consuming, withered, frail, and impotent enemy.

There was no going back.

Time was no longer the protector of Candra but the symptom of the end for all of them.

There was no going back until this hated last shred of his enemy was safely dead.

"We pursue until we catch the last storm-demon," he said.

And yet his feet as he thundered westward went slowly.

And the others all followed him the same.

Slowly, oh so slowly leading where salvation lay.

Along the southern edges where the ocean howled a scattering of wild cacophonies, Kuty noticed something pricking from the earth. She picked it up to find a golden ornate mask with small tendrils radiating from the edges of the face.

Cala idly watched her put it on, those human features dissolving beneath the avian features of some raven thing.

"What is this?" Kuty asked, handing it to Cala.

"It is the mask of the tahlregn. It shows a creature of myth, a terrifying monster which half the time took a form like them."

"I never heard of the tahlregn before."

"They emerged during the times of war after your people were driven from the land. Briefly, they seemed poised to conquer all."

"What happened to them?"

"In their terror of things like this, which never were, they turned on themselves, mother against father and brother against both until in a generation they were dead."

"Because they feared something that didn't exist?"

"No," Cala put the mask away in a small pouch on her left side, "because they knew what they were inside and couldn't live to face it. The beasts they imagined without were simply the reflections of what they were within."

Damn, I sound like some fool poet, Cala thought. But she knew nothing else about them and nothing else was left. Beyond their own fears and terrors, they were gone like the traces of the wind on a windless summer day.

And Kuty then in her mind's eye saw great thundering steps across the tundra and fields searching the source of the echo which they caused.

Then her curiosity turned to pity and she ran with the elf again heading west as all the time the thunder out of the east the louder went.

Chapter 8
Mistress of long knives
of which I'm one

Dhalthran is a land of long grasses where the harvest-men dwell forever running from edge to edge of the sacred ground. Grey-green bodies insectlike rise up and scatter in all directions, seeking, what do they seek? What do they look for where all the grasses look alike, where all the clouds have the same grey symmetries of the continents of rain?

If asked, what would they answer as they seek the ground?

What do any answer when proof of their lives are found?

The plains became desert but Kuty didn't notice when. One footfall was the soft thud of earth and the next her foot passed cleanly into an ocean of dust.

"We approach Shuaz and Setuka," Cala said. "Beyond Shuaz we'll find the Road Between."

"The road between what?"

"Just follow and you'll know," Cala said.

And she did, as her footfalls kept rupturing into the sand below.

After a sixteenth day the pair wandered to the city of Shuaz. At first Kuty imagined it was like the wardens' cities but the closer she came further from her first convictions her new thoughts led.

For though there were walls these were not smoothed but spined, jutting barbs of stones clutching into the red-gold burnt walls.

Arched gates were positioned every few hundred steps, bordered on each side by scoira, naked to the waist, their scorpion tails whispering forward and back behind them.

Four arms were crossed before their chests and their

hairless heads impassively stared with utterly blue eyes upon the dust seas they claimed home.

"Follow my lead," Cala said, and so the pair strode forward, heads bent staring at the ground, moving toward the nearest gate as a throng of other scoira moved forward and back along the selfsame smooth walk the pair walked upon.

Kuty wondered why they would be going into the city then glanced out upon the sands about. And saw them. Small spherical bodies winnowed from dune to dune, their tails waving swiftly in the air. Her mother had mentioned them once, the scorpion-dogs, the unsleeping guardians of the scoira lands.

On six spindly legs, the creatures shimmered, legs which emerged from the sides while a lone large blue eye took in everything at a glance. The creatures were armoured, bands of protective scales like the shells of some ammonite curled upon them, sixteen bands emerging from the spots where their legs began, ending at the other edge of their spherelike forms as if they were curled tight into some ball which if unwrapped a larger monstrosity would emerge.

One prick from a beast's tail had enough venom to end the pair of them, and a hundred others as easily as herself.

Moving through the city was the only safe path.

As the gate loomed over them, she wondered if the venom was strong enough to end a warden but she'd never know considering the wardens were not following them.

A scoira came to the pair, his skin like bronzed stone.

"Where have you come from Cala?" he asked.

"From going to and fro through all the world Thejmei. And you? How fares the children of your home?"

A toothless slit of a mouth widened. *A smile?* Kuty wondered but it was impossible to tell.

"They are well. Soon shall come the time of feasting and I prepare."

Then Cala did something extraordinary. Her face had

been to the ground this time as had all others in pilgrimage to the city when suddenly she raised it and placed her forehead against the scoira's own.

It was an oddly touching gesture, as if an article of farewell.

"When will this happen?" she asked.

"Tonight. Tomorrow Tzyareira will take my place, I fear. I suspect she is not as skilled at the labour as I have been."

"Give her time," Cala said, an odd tenderness in the voice. Then the scoira moved to Kuty's face, staring at her as her eyes were caught halfway between the doors and ground.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"She is Kuty Hugut of the northern lands. She was imprisoned by the last kyrarai but gained her independence at the monster's death."

"You were upon Kyos?"

"Aye, I was."

A flicker of movement crossed the almost impassive features and Kuty recalled once seeing a small grey tick her mother removed from her human skin, a writhing gesture of limbs impotent and terrified yet alien.

This same sensation Kuty glimpsed here.

"You are welcomed in the city of Shuaz but do not mention the kyrarai. *Ever*," he said.

"A simple point of truth," Cala replied, "for would you have me lie to the guardians of the city? But why have I cause to tell another? And after tonight? We leave in the morning at the first-sixteenth of the day."

"Be you well then. Come to me during the time I have prepared for."

"I will stand by your side. Be brave."

Then the pair entered into the city.

It was unlike anything Kuty had imagined.

On Kyos the city was a black ziggurat of interlocking pieces, a subtle mechanistic perfection to the original idea of a city if not the result after so many centuries.

But here?

Roads scattered in all directions like ragged beasts, loping one way, turning the next, buildings placed in all locations, in all forms. Some seemed towers but the towers were built of individual tiers and most of those tiers were laid off-centre one to another. A tower of twenty tiers could have one floor veer to the right, the next to the left, a third to the north, and a fourth to the south creating not a straight smooth skin but the vertical pattern of slowly rising and lowering hills.

And the towers were logical compared to other things.

Some buildings twisted. Once they had been cubes but somehow the walls curled outward and about becoming partially like a dome. However, at a certain point, the walls relented and became a cube again, as if . . . as if the whole city were breathing and these but the outward expressions of a breath.

"She feels us here," Cala said, moving between great crowds of scoira, bronze dark and stone-skinned.

And Kuty followed.

They came to a circular length of road which simply coiled upon itself, the stones growing smaller and smaller till they vanished to a nonexistent point like the curling of some mollusk upon itself.

"We'll stop here," Cala said and sat upon the centre of the path.

"But there's nothing here . . ."

Then the walls started to grow. Soon stone blistered upward in all directions save the path which they had come from and as they did so the crowds moved asunder out of the small circle twenty steps by twenty.

Then the walls closed upward and the building was complete.

Finally, Cala laid back but not before handing Kuty a long length of white cloth in her pouch. She indicated the door and as she did so a small hook grew from the top of the doorframe. Kuty placed the cloth there, letting it drip to the ground, a waterfall of grey shielding them from the hot sun beyond.

"Time to sleep," Cala said.

"Sleep? Why?"

"Because we have to be awake when Thejmei needs me and he won't need me for many hours yet."

"Might I explore the city while you sleep?"

"No. Let me repeat that. *No*. If you value your life, you will stay here and get some rest and wait. The scoira's venom is not as strong as their pets but they will fight to the death if insulted and it can be easy to antagonize them. These shelters are made for beings like us by the city herself to prevent misunderstandings."

"The city herself?"

"Shuaz is not a city's name. Shuaz is the name of the being whose flesh mimics stone. It is at her pleasure we are welcomed and is at her displeasure we are taken off this earth's skin." Cala shut her eyes and let her body relax as the ground suddenly softened. "As long as you don't act rashly no harm befalls you here."

And Kuty imagined leaving while Cala slept, moving out amid the crowds, learning all she could, but then . . . quietly she went to where Cala rested, laid beside her, and turned her face to that of her friend.

A smooth door slid upward sealing them in while a small hole opened in the side of the dome and a cool desert wind slipped in.

They slept.

Baligostria turned south. He strode by the hills, their rolling flesh to his left, and the others walked with him, but he

noticed a few looked back. Wafradne and Masyrbavel, Jugnrel and Aalra continued to turn northward the more south they went.

Hydraxaspe strode by him fearlessly though as did Algarda and Zutreiya. When the southern sea pricked its senses to his eyes, he noticed the scent of human and elf and the few worm-sign steps of the pair heading west.

"We have followed them faithfully and now the path is clear," their leader said.

Wafradne however was gazing at the sea and the sun which had climbed from south to north.

"I had forgotten the feel of this sea," the giant said. "I had forgotten the sun hot on my face. How long had I stood waiting for the end?"

"The storm-demon turns west and so shall we!" Baligostria roared. But of his party, four were not noticing the steps.

Hoary frost-green hair uncurled outward becoming like a summer's meandering day as the feel of their skin fuller into life they became.

The sun. Bursania of course felt the sun but Kyos was bereft. It was a dark twilight upon the shore and the bracken of ancient reeds was as a paled echo compared to the full rose-flesh of the golden sun.

It was as if all summer poured herself full-bodied down upon the thoughts of them and they in savouring her truly became themselves at last.

Or at least most of them.

"What are you waiting for? She escapes!"

Zutreiya gazed at the four then at Baligostria. Hydraxaspe stood beside his liege of course, (one would never use such an ugly word as king but liege was fine in the thoughts of them,) and Algarda was prepared to continue the trek, Algarda who had the glory of knowing he killed a storm-demon in his prime and now

had nothing else to show for his great deed than the chance to cross earth and water to kill a thing less powerful than glory's foul sting.

The others were young though. The others were young.

They had not spent years piled to years in the service of defence. They had no need to cross their thoughts to amber, to make Kyos their everything. Gone was the pure service of old since so few of the enemy were left. Some, yes, some he suspected would not even consider their final service the apogee of their lives but seek and find something else worthwhile, like standing upon the southern shore as the tide of light upon them came.

And afterward, they would continue to have lives while Baligostria what fate was his?

The liege of the wardens gripped the shoulders of the wayfarer and shook him, then seeing the uselessness of this turned staring full-faced at Zutreiya.

"And will you abandon the sacred too?" he asked.

The sacred? What was sacred about housing a dying race whose only crime had been their births to past monsters they knew no more of than his own kind knew theirs?

The sacred?

The sun beat down upon him and he finally relaxed. The great tension of his body gave way and he sat cross-legged staring at the sun.

"I have had enough," the giant said. "You heard the arlgith. The storm-demons are dead. Only daughter left of them is not even forged of their own body. The red-lion throne is empty Baligostria and none will ever fill it. The last tyrant of their kind is dead and she was no more a tyrant than you are now. I am spent."

And small tendrils shook off his body and for a time he fed into the deep earth, vaguely noticing the pools of scent where the elf's form must have been, little knowing he sat exactly where she had.

Hydraxaspe stared at the five of them. Of course, there were still a few along the edges of the northern shore, even a few in Kyos now. But at her death the ebbing had begun.

And yet?

What was left to do that had not been done? She was out there and she was the fulfilment of a task, a promise.

There was nothing more for him than that.

"Come Baligostria," he said, "leave them and let your loyal service to our people be rewarded. We will find the last storm-demon and bring her to her death."

Later when the sun descended to the other side of the soil the giants stirred. Five massive frames rose up and for a moment they recalled the words. *None now shall sit upon the red-lion throne.* True. The last scrap of power, last vestige of their authority, the great scarlet throne with the two lions carved to either side of it was emptied and could never be filled again.

And yet a stirring came to them, a thought of Baligostria trying to fill it himself. Or worse trying to force the ill-fitting form of the girl upon the symbol of their dread.

And then they all wandered home instead.

"Do you need anything?"

Byrgirou stood in the great gallery of the dwarves. Silver adorned the halls and a thick-bodied being came before him, clean-shaven, his clothes a testament to their skill. In the void, if anything erred then the green metallic clothing would swell, a clear helm would grow to shield their faces from the abyss and air would pump into them produced by the cloth itself, the living skin they used when they crossed the corridors from planet to planet.

"Thank you, no."

Byrgirou sat upon a dais beside a throne. It was old, ancient in fact, remnant of something made long before. Yet it was not kyrarai. Xi perhaps? Tiger-folk? It hardly mattered now.

The other side of the throne revealed a human statue kneeling in sympathy away from the lord or king who once sat upon the grey stone world which was its own. He of course took the other place as if he were a human, some blunt beast like them.

And all the time he kept thinking about the woman somewhere scattered, her ring and her companion and the long knives she bore, as if she had claws. So very like a god.

And the black oil smear shifted its weight from sitting upon the throne and Byrgirou caught it staring at him so very much like he was a child, waiting to be scorned.

And after a time, the reluctant god drifted to sleep.

She awoke.

It was night and Cala awoke, Kuty awoke too, and quickly they rose, she drew forth a few blades and the doors uncurled backward and without speaking she raced to the place of the feast.

And he was there.

She had come in time to watch Thejmei and she went down to where he stood in the great circular maw of the opened chamber, placed her forehead against his own, handed him a blade or two, and then retreated to the edge as Kuty watched him take the blade, stare at the stars and howl.

He was waiting to die.

Waiting for his children to be born.

Chapter 9
No matter how close to death you come you can always come closer still

Dauann is an endless sea of grass and circling above a vulture sails, lone ship cast against the tides of air while all the grass below silently sings, whispering nothing to no one in all the silent country of itself.

And still the vulture sails and still she will not rest for she is death and death is all unfed in the country without the memory of death.

Thejmei had come to the end of his long journey.

He had been born, awakening to consciousness upon the land, his belly full, his eyes widening in the dim nothing of the night.

Then his purpose was assured. He knew himself, what he was and did, felt the hot skin of his body blister and in a second it was daylight, in another night, and he was shown the gate and his place in it was set, where his mother stood before and her father before her.

Then the long wait. Then he noticed her.

She strode to the gate and she was fair and full of life and their long courtship seemed to take forever, he sliding after her, he following her swaying poisoned steps, then a night of endless passion, then the slow recall, and finally a clutch of eggs.

And now he was here and soon another would take his place, his daughter likely.

And he drew up the blade as the clutch of eggs blistered from the stony ground and rupturing their bodies suddenly twenty small forms assailed him and his last thought was of Cala who had watched him grow from infant into father.

And he was devoured by his children while the body of their mother lay preserved in the catacomb chambers of the city's

lungs below. And he died content in his great purpose, satisfied in his long life. He was only four days old.

Chapter 10
And I will lie upon the platform of the bones and know not rest

Zyme is a grey smooth field occupied only by twenty souls. And each of them dwells in a city of their own, a spider-legged city thick-bodied crossing the smooth field so that one never knows if they had stepped at all or lingered in one place for all time or dwelled amid the medusa strands of their own delusional state.

For each imagines the entire world is theirs and they are alone nor recall the time before when each city was filled of endless strands of life and they but the youngest born, and now the only ones left lingering.

Twenty souls as the world grows wider in its emptiness every day.

Kuty stood motionless till long after the feast was done. Small ravenous maws had torn the man apart yet the knives he held hung uselessly at his sides. Much later Cala explained to Kuty how such forms of life began.

Some scoira Cala explained lived as long as humans, longer in fact, while others only dwelled among the living for a short time. And to satiate the needs of their children they became the first taste of food, the first step of the chain of being, the last link to all those who came before and all those who would come after.

And his daughter would take up the challenge of the gate, stand watch and wait, seek a lover, brood a family, and in their birth, she'd cease.

But never truly cease.

Such was the way of things.

And at daybreak Kuty sputtered into sleep, her dream interrupted by fearful glances of her mother disapproving

everything upon the city of the end while she was devoured by a warden as the monster screamed . . .

And all the time a fretful thundering she felt, familiar as the feel of her heartbeat, or less.

Cala introduced herself to the children of her friend.

She moved among them as they grew, her eye focused upon Tzyareira whom Thejmei knew would take his place at the proper gate. It was an unconscious knowledge not easily arrived at.

He could not simply point and say this child would become this, that another path would take. And yet in unconscious moments he'd suspect, say this child to his former state she'd grow to, but, if wrong what did it matter?

He would not be there to see it anyway.

And if right, what did it matter?

He would not be there to see it anyway.

He could have been wrong about her of course. So, Cala watched her as the sun came up to see if, in her glance or grace or gait, some former aspect of her friend remained.

She did. And as the sun rose, she guessed her friend was right.

After a day the child would be the new watcher of the gate. But she would still have so much to learn before her death her life claimed.

Later she returned to the dome where Kuty slept.

She could have slept, inched herself beside the girl but some unconscious thought held back her hopes awhile.

There was a thunder-rumbling coming out of the east.

It was subtle, but she was sure.

The wardens were coming to meet the last trace of their quarry. She idly wondered if it was a rage the wardens felt or pleasure to not be denied the end of their purpose yet.

She roused Kuty and soon the pair fled the edges of

Shuaz, heading southwest toward Setuka.

En route, a question plagued Kuty, something nestled from sleep she couldn't shake.

She looked to Cala leading the way and spoke at last.

"Why don't you weep for him?"

"Weep?" Cala asked.

In her dreams she felt tears and in waking some word caught wickedly in her throat. Perhaps some trace of a human feeling she only finally first understood or stooped to know.

"Why don't you mourn the man?"

"Do you think I should?" she asked.

Far in the distance the hoary head of a hook-nosed giant came to view, clouds obscuring their features on the wind. She did not envy them for they were striding into the landmine of barbs and spines.

"Yes," Kuty said finally as she ran. "I think you should, and don't, and I would know the reason why."

She's right I guess but how do I prove it? A word caught wickedly in Cala's throat as well, some tumourlike logic she tried to tell the girl.

"He lived his life and did his duty well. He married, he fathered children, he loved. What more is life than this?" *And how would you know?* She thought to herself.

"Will you miss him, now he's gone?" Kuty asked. Had she missed her mother? Not at first but the longer she stayed beyond the walls of her home and the walls of water the sooner she understood there was more to life than just striving to live.

But she couldn't yet say why. Perhaps why didn't matter.

"Of course, I'll miss him . . ." But the sentence she couldn't end. She met him as an infant and in a day watched him live. Then she came to Calranus . . . he lived as long as her relationship with Kuty began, lived long as she knew the girl yet if he had died at the hands of the wardens would she weep for him, or

mourn?

But for Kuty what would she not do? And why?

She couldn't answer yet. Perhaps why didn't matter.

Could she answer the question in another four days or would she linger in this no man's land, her words indecisive while her actions and intents bluntly told the very earth thoughts she could not speak?

It was an unconscious knowledge not easily arrived at.

". . . just like I'd miss you," she said finally, finishing the thought the best she could.

And all the time the rumble-thunder of war drum footsteps thundered their intent.

Baligostria felt the pinprick of fire and gazed down to see the scorpion-dog at play though it was only play to him. The three wardens stumbled into the fire as a river of acid poured upward through their legs. And with a thought like a toss of amber, he crumpled them with his footfall, and burst bodies stained the ground.

And the scoira came and amassed before them, wondering at the sacrilege.

"I seek the girl Kuty and the elf Cala," the warden said, pain pricking at his feet like a serpent's venom crushed against his heel.

"They have left," a female scoira said, "but it matters not. The wardens have no business this far west. Return to your land and leave our kin in peace. Or would there be war?" she asked.

At the word the warden relented.

Once after the storm-demons fled there had been war, a century or more of conflict until some fool fled south and touched the land of Lrruisa. Then the xi reacted and sped a fleet of ships of light and nightmare, fire and rain and storm and thunder and shimmering heat athwart a terror and the war ceased utterly.

And the message was clear after that.

The xi had not been conquered by storm-demon nor anything and they wished to be at peace, had been quite content, until they were disturbed. And war, if it disturbed the xi in any way would not be tolerated.

The storm-demons conquered.

But the xi might leave nothing left.

"No," Baligostria sputtered, "I seek no war with you but the girl is dangerous. She is the last of the storm-demons. Grant us passage I beg."

"You might have asked. If she is dangerous, we would have given you safe passage. You *should* have asked." A click of her tongue against the chitin of her lips and the pricking ceased and the wardens wandered through but gazing down they saw the disapproving scorn of countless eyes locked at theirs.

And knowing he had killed their companions a shame caught inside him. For the scorpion-dogs were doing their tasks defending, as any warden would.

And a haunting thought came to him the venom he felt would not kill him but after Kuty's death, the grief of his actions would.

Then the scoira clustered the ruined bodies of their companions to them and wept at the loss of them, without a hint of restraint. And the waters of their tears the dust seas felt.

They had to find a safe harbour soon.

Setuka would not do. But Setuka was not their destination now. They had come to the Road Between. The Serpent Mountains dipped closest at this point, the dividing barrier between the western and eastern lands interrupted by a plain that ran between mountain and desert where Setuka was located and if they headed against the mountain, they'd find the Cyas Caves.

Baligostria strode forward but the venom was slowing him. Foolish. He could have thrown his voice out against the

walls and revealed his intentions. They would have listened if it involved the storm-demons.

But though they let them pass they made no action of aid either. Their thoughts turned slowly toward the dead and not even the threat of the ancient enemy would sway their hand.

They were in mourning, their great duty to defend ended.

He glanced back to see the guards had made pyres of ruptured bodies, ritually mourning each life he had foolishly squandered to no end. And though they wished the storm-demon dead nothing would prevent them from finishing the likes of him when his great task was done.

The scoira had led all other races in vanquishing the storm-demons. Did three wardens really stand a chance against such latent force, such blunt potential left to swell and swelter waiting for an outlet as that?

Fresh wounds of grief each felt and he imagined the grief's wound would spread outward as a cancerous web, a black decayed infection heading in all directions, but especially heading toward Setuka.

In sympathy those of the sister city would grieve and sharpened on that empathetic grief they might not care why the giants intruded. They would defend and they would not linger or wait for an explanation.

He knew they of Setuka would avenge if but to prove their love to their sister city's kin.

He turned his feet toward the Serpent Mountains and the others followed in his stead away from the likes of them, righteous in their fury which would not long end.

They reached the Cyas Caves and the great black maws beckoned them and Cala turned back to see the giants heading toward them now. Did they know which way they went?

She could not understand. Perhaps it didn't matter now.

The pair rushed into the caverns as if only in the deep

below would they find peace.

Baligostria strode toward walls of upraised stone to see a platform had been raised. Strange, it seemed an odd place for such a thing.

A body lay upon this raft of wood in a sea of air and gazing down he realized it was a body.

The platform was to his waist and bending down a moment he couldn't understand then realized it was a ritual for the dead. Ah yes, those of Setuka sometimes did this, laying prized members of their community suspended between sky and ground in memorial to them.

He carefully moved about it as did the other wardens without quite knowing why, and continued their pursuit of the pair.

Chapter 11
Rendered all to larkspur and to shadow

Myr is a world of azure-stained sand, as is the sky, a dark oceanic shimmering only distinguishable because hues lessen or expand, revealing a darker shade of a circular city surrounded by blunt round walls or a lesser shade of sky where bone-winged ainyr wheel forever, small twig-thin children of storm who laugh and sail and rail against the terror others feel in their being born.

And the dreamers of Myr ascend to the black lotus gardens of M'tar to dream, to tell their ancient stories and long-held half-forgotten songs, in M'tar and Baigi and Xaisjuestria and Mair-Vaisoqtreuia, each syllable a sign of the ornateness of their sleep.

And once Byrgirou walked among them marvelling at his invention, imagining if for but a moment he had created a perfect thing . . .

But you haven't, the dark voice in his head said.

He awoke.

The ancient god had slumbered, dreaming upon the last shreds of his first glory but now he had stumbled to wakefulness in the voice of his enemy.

"Leave me to my sleep," the reluctant god said.

They were still in the chamber at the most northerly edge of Candran soil. The ocean ripped valiantly against the stones and the dwarves plagued the earth with their presence, or so in a drunken moment of scorn, he thought.

He might kill them all or silence them or make them burn or bleed or bend but he couldn't and his strength ebbed and he doubted he could even create a raven as meal for his hated friend.

Donegal appeared then, though it was only the shadow.

Now though the manticore took human form the most

masculine voice of his child Byrgirou knew. The human form was of the fugitive girl.

"Marvellous, isn't it?" Donegal/Kuty asked.

"What?"

"These forms." The body pirouetted about the centre of the gallery emptied of all except himself and he. "It is such a wondrous thing to touch, to feel, to know these hands can grasp or bend or break or burn. Or bleed."

"You mock me my desires."

"Hardly yours and surely not mine. But you've been getting worse the longer you've been in this place. Your strength is failing you as it failed the others."

"The ring will make me well."

"Why? How do you know?"

"Because Donegal in his last breath told me."

"Ah. Yes."

Byrgirou had been there of course. The shimmering blue of a gate had appeared and there was Donegal in a shadowland bravely dying beside his children, they in their grief, he in empathy of them as he mentioned, (why had he mentioned?), a ring while others gathered upon the ruined husk of Zanaan rendered cemetery for those first been born here.

Of course, the ring was to have been acquired at his death but Byrgirou lingered, putting the date of his redemption off, especially after the kyrarai so horribly betrayed all Yyaalis intended of them. They had not continued to be as she wished them but had become bitter, perverse . . . he *could not* have intervened.

And none of the others dared do otherwise than Byrgirou intended.

So, he had waited and now was the perfect time. Once the ring was his his shadow would dissolve and emptied of this evil Ledhia would be born, a new country made in fulfilment of Myr and Remaliah and Xara. Soon Ledhia would restore his faith in

him.

"What about Myr?" the shadow asked. "Wasn't that world enough for you, my friend?"

The dust seas extended forever. Each particle was so perfect they acted as water might, the perfect structure turning ocean or earth with a single footfall or season. One could step to the ground one day and swim or drown the next.

The sky was the same shade of blue but lesser, and the ainyr, ah yes, the ainyr, bone-winged little insect-things with a dragonfly's eyes, their bodies shimmering into and out of existence occasionally, but just occasionally, and only when the wind was right.

And the dreamers? Tall and slender lovely things who once had wars, or duels, bloodless things, and ritualized hate, but since he created time running backward from the moment of his arrival all the wars were prologue, all history an afterthought.

Yet from the point of view of those who fought the world had always existed even when it had not.

And there were the great circular coin-cities etched and blocklike, walls blunt to hold back the wine dust seas of earth where dreamers spent their days in quiet contemplation, imagining all they could or all they would or all that would not be.

But was there more to life than this?

Was there more than quiet contemplation or the black lotus gardens suspended halfway between the earth and sky or their constant droning tongues, each trying to outdo the other in wild cacophonies of thought, and when one died his books, her stories were gathered up but what happened to the longing memory of them?

Can you not be happy with just a single world, the shadow said. It was no question though it seemed worded that way, but an accusation, a glimpsing of the truth.

He created one of the first planets in existence and laid the groundwork for life, beings who felt neither pain nor sorrow but lingered in their loving joy at having been given speech and the gift of words. And yet he was not happy.

He had not ever realized this before.

And stumbling upward to his feet he asked, "Was Donegal ever happy?" And the girl-form was gone, the shadow gone, fled somewhere he didn't understand. In his weakened state, the shadow escaped.

I would have an answer, the reluctant god asked, knowing it was no statement but a question. Only.

And perfumed wine dust seas assailed his senses once and then were replaced by a scent of ash.

The shadow strolled out of the mountains a time. He went to and fro through the world, a dim and light-bodied thing at once seeming lifeless yet pulsing with an endless black sea of regeneration.

The forests of Valari were to the south of the mountains and the shadow focused his thoughts and fled there.

The great oaks were of Earth he knew. They had been taken here when Earth burnt so many rough centuries before. None remembered Earth, neither human nor elves nor even the dreamers on far off, nearly vanished Myr.

But he did. The shadow could hardly forget.

He slither-strode amid the trees and noticed a body lying there. An elf. He bent down to see the decaying features. The elves had tossed as a thought to amber this body, this hardened thing softened to wet clay. There was no sign of memorial dedication or recall.

So little changed since the time of the dreamers of Myr, the shadow thought to himself. It hardly meant the elves were evil, or scorn was visited to his throat in the thought of them. Byrgirou had made them and had made them to the best of his ability and

they had changed. They had grown. All save this.

They still clutched a vague disdain to their hearts when one of their number died.

Of course, the jalal ate their dead, he thought to himself, *but then again at least they remembered them.*

And all the time the shadow worried about his darker half buried in the galleries of the dwarves waiting for the exile to return, to acquire the ring, and in the acquisition end the shadow from off the face of the earth.

Well, we all have to go sometime, the shadow said in his heart. But was it himself or Byrgirou the shadow meant?

He scoured the islands a time. In the bay of Karn to the west of the Valari Forest he noticed the islands of Tairen and the port of Asher. Humans nestled there, sailors who in ships of wood scoured the ancient waters.

To the south of this, he trailed the isle of Moravan where the vampires slumbered, waiting for their kings to unseat them from their rest.

Other isles sped by, Xymth named in echo of a planet, the Isles of Torment, the isle of Ben Cali where the serpent-children walked, moving in a maddening circle about the edges of the waters, climbing ever softly up until he reached Kyos.

He slither-strode the city of the end, gazed at the twilight of the northern country unfinished then headed further north where the Serpent Mountains clutched at the northern pole.

And then with a hop as a small raven might he landed where he began. For the isle of Kyos was barely less than a sixteenth day's swim east to the galleries of the dwarves.

Of course, the kyrarai were prevented from crossing the water.

But a human girl could have swum the distance without even a great loss of breath, or, if too cold, (the shadow forgot what cold was sometimes,) a simple raft she could have built. The

last storm-demon could have died in fire and fury and the wardens with their eyes on her would never have even noticed the girl sailing east.

But the last all-knowing storm-demon had not thought of that, so convinced was she the wardens could see everything that mattered to the likes of them, and besides she had an infallible escape plan to save her kind from death by making her own child something other than she had been, changing her so completely no true trace of kyrarai was left.

And Byrgirou imagined the kyrarai the wisest creations his kind ever made.

With a short laugh, the shadow slithered into the ocean to speak to a few creatures unknown to elf or man as all the storms seemed rendered raven to larkspur then.

Chapter 12
Bright serpent sunshine in the shadow of cigar

Remaliah is a world of forests, of ancient oaks which pierce the upper edges of the sky, great red forests and leaves, and amid them walk the serpent-children in robes and black-silvered garments.

The serpent-children, serpent-priests hold all life sacred so when even a sparrow falls, they notice it, even a fragrant fragile leaf they mourn, and all their thoughts they turn to the recollection of all things.

Amid the worlds the serpent-children are known for one thing only; being quite simply mad.

Siemti stretched and stared out into the water. The port of Unulr, forged and grown of white coral, squatted against a few white hills and as he stared out, he saw . . . *what in the world was that?* Lapis lazuli scales glittered about yellow topaz eyes as his fangs itched and his rattlesnake-coiled snout curled back in disdain because he could see on the mainland something moving. Ormeluesia stood beside him, her claws black-glittering in the sun.

"What are they?" she asked.

"I don't know, but they seem familiar. Yes, yes, I know now. I've heard of them in our ancient histories. Those are giants walking near Setuka."

"Giants, this far south . . . incredible."

From each door they came, serpentine bodies on black glittering talons nestled upon the edges of metallic-green scales of legs, each one watching the impossibility they could not help but see.

First the Serpent Mountains, the jagged spines of grey which broke apart the world, each spire a glancing blow against the storm-tossed skies which licked like hungry dogs at the upper

air.

And then three monstrosities cross the deserts below.

They didn't seem real. Each footfall seemed like a pillar of stone moving, only the pillar was a fourth the size of a city and it extended upward into a body ill-suited for the sane.

For the torso extended in a bulging fortress seemingly of flesh and the arms curled like branches thickened into forests and at the extremities, branches relaxed into long fingers, almost humanlike.

And the heads. Long hooked noses jutted forward and yellow lakes of eyes glanced in all directions and the long slit of a mouth widened like the black sky thrust in the middle of the day.

And they were crossing the desert searching and Siemti didn't know what they were searching for. And yet.

Yet he feared whatever they were seeking with all his heart and mind.

The shadow crawled back from going to and fro through all the world. Byrgirou noticed it but said nothing as it came.

The shadow changed, taking on features of a serpent-child, black lace-wing talons, lapis lazuli scales tattooed about the eyes.

Byrgirou stirred uneasily and strode beside the form. After Myr had come Remaliah when he had sought to infuse his new children with perfect empathy.

And yet that implied his own empathy perfect was.

"What were they like?" he asked quite suddenly.

"Oh, they seemed fine, though long removed from the forests of their birth. I noticed a few of the elfin kind here too, showing still the absence you intended."

"I had not meant to leave such a gap in them, such a flaw in them."

"So, you overburdened your other child with too much. Fortunately, the serpent-children learned from their mistakes. I

noticed many of them grieving for the dead but the tears did not flow forever and not all wept who passed the way."

On Remaliah had one shed tears in empathy all tears were shed. They had made a science of grief, a wasting study of how each life is interconnected with the next. And yet some fled, as those of Myr fled, out into the void to gain a semblance of some normalcy to them.

And some arriving here could live their lives without dread.

The giants walked and the serpent-born serpent-children watched and waited.

"I wonder why the giants have come?" Ormeluesia asked.

"I do not know, perhaps some fine reason, or some foul. I do not know what quarry they seek. But I know I fear for them."

"Should we act?" she asked.

"Would you stand in the way of such as that?"

And so all stood a time and waited then went on with their lives when on another planet they would have stood transfixed in communion with the giants until they starved and died.

Of course, the wardens could not do the same for them for the earth and sun sustained them and little else besides. Certainly not the hoped-for aid of those upon the ocean's other side.

"Why do you seek my death?" the shadow asked.

Byrgirou had long left the galleries and was now gazing fixedly westward to Kyos.

"You are an infection, a black-cancer sickness and I would be rid of you."

"I am just your lust, your wrath, your pride, your sloth, your greed, your envy, and your gluttony. But do you know what I am not? I am not your despair."

And Byrgirou laughed thunderously like the march of

giants' tread upon the dusty soil of southern sands below. And in the sliver of it, he was weeping without repair.

"You haunt me just as you haunted all of them who dissolved like sea foam, but I will not succumb! Not yet! Not yet!" Not yet . . . this world is a dewdrop world, and yet, and yet . . . and he but a drop of dew dwindling into nothingness. Not yet.

Yet, what more was left?

He could not let the others die in vain. Had they died in vain? They had awaited his command to bridge the unfathomable shadows with a terrible loneliness and he had not relented but waited to make perfect everything. Yet the longer he stayed his hand, the longer his perfect creation lay hidden in the shadow of his heart the sooner fell his children who could not understand.

"Why do you seek death?" the shadow asked at last.

"I don't," he stammered now, gazing westward at the cemetery soil and the mausoleum city and he stammered that he didn't. He didn't seek his death. He sought the shadow's end and nothing more would come of it.

"The ring could have been yours at any time yet you waited. Is that what Donegal intended?"

"To see them all decayed . . . I . . . I couldn't . . ."

"Why didn't you create more then, in sympathy to those lost?"

And he was at a loss for words.

There was a logic to refraining. An object in motion cannot be stopped and a country first created cannot merely be added to. Could one simply add more aspects, fill in more details, add a city here, add a life there . . . and then the thought of gazelles racing through a giants' city and the logic caught wickedly in him as something false and dirty and coarse.

Donegal could have been created again, or Yyaalis, could have filled the world of living things but both had succumbed. It was grief because one couldn't simply replace a life. A child dead couldn't be replaced by a new living child, a word lost couldn't be

replaced by another word found.

The logic ran cold and hard but the reality was not about logic or the hard laws of a universe newly born. The reality was the manticores had not rebuilt the dead because it would have meant pretending those gone never existed and like a child longing for their parents, they couldn't replace the essence of their hearts like that. No child could ever replace a parent first lost to them.

"Because it would have been pretending they never were."

Donegal's face pressed close against his own.

"It'll be alright old-father," the shadow said, mimicking his own child's voice, "it'll be alright one day. I have faith in you. You can try again. You can make this right for all of them."

"You are a disease," the old god said.

"Disease of a sick heart I know. Oh, by the way, I found the girl and her friend."

"I imagined as much, your reason for leaving me when you did."

"Yes, they're in the Cyas Caves. You remember the tiger-folk, don't you?"

Csolyel. They were about to wander among the creations of Csolyel, his daughter who had fashioned the tiger-folk and talrano, the galic and the cadari shad.

They might be going to their deaths, he wondered.

And do you fear for them?

I do.

Then there's progress for you yet.

And far away upon a crimson world a serpent-priest sat gazing into a blazing fire as night crept on soft small fingers and he smoked a pipe and in the shadow of the cigar and the burning embers caught a fading glimpse of a dying end, realized at the

moment this finality and accepted it, as he turned to the fire amidst the ancient-scarlet trees again.

As night came at last.

Chapter 13
Name of the world is ocean

Xara is ocean. It is an emerald world littered of countless isles but it is ocean. Land is anomaly, the slipping sideways logic of something unreal. Forest and sand, earth and stone are dreams clutched at by them who sail the cool warm waters upon floating cities, all manner of peoples, all manner of shapes dwelling upon the skin of the sea. For the name of the world is ocean. Xara is just another way of saying the same thing.

In the end, he only had himself to blame.

Baligostria stumbled headlong to the mountains and toward the caverns saw it. He couldn't understand the green glint pinprick against the sands at first and then he bent forward and realized as he grasped it what he was looking at. A jewel. The girl had shed it, perhaps without realizing, and now he knew the way she went.

Odd though, the jewel in his hand, this glimmer growing larger somehow, as if in compensation to him.

In the end, he only had himself to blame.

The jewel had been given to Kuty by her mother, the second jewel her father stole after acquiring the gem to make her human. Sometimes at night Kuty suspected the jewel her mother hoarded was some switch to return her to her true state but it couldn't be.

Instead, it was a library of the entire history of Zanaan, their voyage amid the stars, their arrival here, their songs, histories, and mythologies, all condensed to give a semblance of a truth to the last inheritor of themselves.

And buried at the conclusion was the last record of the last kyrarai king spoken through his thoughts. The library was meant to be opened off-world but perhaps the warden's flesh seemed a

key.

And so, he was given the lives of his enemies, culminating in the testimony of Darsyap-Igel the Depraved.

"What's wrong?" Cala asked as they crept further into the cave. Endless high walls curled upward and though it should have been black-ice-cold the walls were golden, the lower world warm. Kuty turned back to realize the jewel was gone, lost somewhere when she stumbled into the cave. But though it seemed important something told her not to tarry back.

"It's of no consequence," she said, her sense of loss balanced by a feeling that beyond the walls was a thing of dread.

No, yes, ***no,*** *this was not Candra, too many moons in the sky, and those colours? He had no names for them.*

What am I? What is this? But the words were twisted along three throats and he could see with three pairs of eyes. Four arms descended and instantly he sought a mirror, reflection, some pool or . . . bending down he caught a glimpse of one of them.

Two wolf faces, one boar's head peered up at him grinning wickedly at himself and great grey wings shook from his shoulders like frost at morn. A scorpion's tail whipped up and instantly he struck as the reflection's tail shot upward and both shattered the reflected cool of the water into shards of melting glass, fragile as a word.

"Lhyeib!" he was called and turned to see another come toward him. He slunk back, his body riven with despair but suddenly started to forget. He was no longer Baligostria now.

He had become Lhyeib.

He was led toward their maker and that night Yyaalis laughed and he duelled with sword and barb-blunt venom and all his former life promptly forgot.

And he passed, slowly at first, then running sure, passing from flesh to flesh the further he went. He was standing upon the Shadow

Planet but also stood upon Zanaan and other worlds while likewise striding between the stars.

Then he noticed tiger-folk in their great armadas of ships.

There was war between the stars, great giants in service to the fur-etched forms of the tiger-folk and their battle against the reptilian cadari shad and he fought and laboured, yes, laboured to free the slaves captured and imprisoned by the tiger-folk.

Before the plague hit the kyrarai they stopped a war and brought peace. Peace. The word was a source of their souls to them, not an absence of conflict but a comfort in themselves.

But then the plague came.

He felt himself undone, first a body then another, and a few pieces of himself he scattered to other planets, dwindling embers leaving Candra last while the talrano slipped likewise there and the galic who were the ancestors of the wardens.

He had never been told.

And Zanaan was emptied and he was the last kyrarai who ever stood upon its shores, he the first to stand upon Candran soil.

And slowly he felt himself shrink and diminish and saw his hands bloodied and raw when he issued command, he Darsyap-Igel who ordered his kind to take this world and rebuild what had been lost.

And a scream began that simply wouldn't stop.

And the galic were changed, their minds broken, but somehow something remained, and he watched his numbers grow taunt and twisted as slowly he saw his plans dissolve like sea foam in the rain.

And he lay broken-bodied upon the edges of Kyos Isle staring at a realm he'd never get to truly see again, centuries condensed to two screams, first of his victims, lastly of himself.

And then the story sputtered onward leading to a last mad glimpse and grasp of air, a few poisoned breaths, and nothing more. For Kuty wasn't there.

There was much more, each life and biography, each song and story, each birth and death and he clutched all in an instant and all

likewise poured itself into him.

And suddenly he knew the story wasn't over for he saw himself reaching for the jewel upon the sand, this new chapter added to the rest, implying but one thing.

The history of the kyrarai was not at rest for he had become the last trace of them. He knew and felt the weight of an entire species pressed against his chest. He became one of them as one by one they left him and he emptied as a blackness fell at noon.

And he wept.

Baligostria opened his eyes to realize the others had stood over him, patiently terrified.

They knew of sleep in the abstract the way one might know a colour they'd only seen a second before; it existed and was surely not dangerous but what did it mean to them? They had no point of reference on the best way to act.

So, they waited not knowing what else to do.

Baligostria sat up. He was upon the familiar ground of Candra and he was amid his people. But he had not forgotten a single aspect of the journey. He came on unsteady legs, unsteady as the throne Darsyap-Igel once sat upon, and vomited. On hands and knees, he expelled black bile like from some cancerous wound, and when finished the others carried him beside the grey mountain to rest.

He tried to speak but words failed, he caught the essence of what he longed to say and asked, "Stone? Jewel?" Algarda shook his massive head and pointed to Baligostria's hand. The jewel had fused into the skin, a small green pulse reverberating like a heartbeat that could not ever end.

It had become part of him. He could not be rid of it. He had become the last chain of what he hated. And coarsely he started to sing a song he did not know, a funeral dirge the kyrarai used when Zanaan had reached its end.

Night came on swift small fingers and Baligostria slept. He hadn't ever needed to before but now the waves of days sundered into him and as two stood watch he closed his yellowed eyes and drifted mellow into rest.

And he was kyrarai then. He was standing on Candra but this was not the time of the conquest but earlier. Bursania was being built and the kyrarai among them, helping. Alien hands grasped iron-stone and he felt upward to place it where it wanted to go and he remembered the dying roots of dust on Zanaan, and he wept.

And he was comforted by a galic whose hooked nose bent down and a great hand reached out as if they were friend to friend.

And later he was comforted and went on with his work again.

Chapter 14
The land of the human-feathered birds

Galgan is a living world. Blue-green oceans breathe in concert with lung-cities, in sympathy with mouth-deserts, and in each aspect of itself lay the potential for creatures unimaginable and unfathomable and unknowable until they are conceived.

Small winged creatures flitter in skies of turquoise gazing at a further aspect of themselves while those dwellers of the cities grow outward limbs, sixteen arms or eight, finishing on spindle-flicked fingers like the tentacles of the dwellers of the water, changing not the nature of themselves truly but only what they grasp or what they bring to the surface of themselves.

And if any not of Galgan was to step upon it would they wonder at such alien flesh as this? And what might it imagine such alien flesh to be since all things are themselves, itself utterly?

The caves grew larger the longer they walked. At first, they towered overhead, great maws connecting the thin membrane of the outer and inner worlds seeming like the throat of some primordial thing.

But now the roof of the caverns could not be seen.

Now no matter how high they peered there seemed no end to anything but a black decay above and yet the light dimmed not as if the walls a hidden fire became.

Behind them, far in the distance, the wardens could be felt. They could not come into the caverns but they could sense perhaps the runners running after sanctuary. And if they knew or guessed the path the pair walked, they'd discover where the end of the path lay and perhaps there the pair would be caught, where there would be no escape.

Reverberating against the walls Kuty sensed an older

rhythm, a funeral dirge the kyrarai once sang. Distorted in the dimming countries she did not know from which direction it came.

Cala peered ahead and caught a glimpse of herself reflected in the wall. It was a fleeting glimpse and for a moment she knew not what she saw then stepping forward touched the rough wall with her hand.

But nothing was there. A mere trick of the unseen light.

The haquil gazed at them while it could not truly be seen from its place not upon the walls but in them. Sometimes it appeared human or elf save its three-fingered hands and the absence of a face where instead were swirling colours centering around a point.

At other moments it was not imaginable, its entire form spread across all existence taking whatever shape the nature of that reality wished. In some aspects, it breathed arsenic, in others it had a trillion eyes each composed of pure silicon, itself a body made of glass.

Here it phased into the stone though it could suffice for short seconds out into the world of empty space beyond, walking between the worlds.

Viewed from its side the two seemed alien though it knew them utterly. For embedded in the walls on its side of existence the entire spectrum of possibility bled into everything.

In one thread Candra was entirely ruled by the kyrarai, entire lands filled of their kind and no other. Twenty cities slouched upon the plains while all other life had died or never come to be.

In another, the kyrarai all perished on Zanaan and here the elves took hold, or humanity, or the nubla or the giants held sway.

Here a sea of ice obliterated all.

There Candra loomed too close to its sun and suddenly

gardens of fire swept out as beasts of flame blazed briefly and were gone.

The haquil existed along all this mosaic of possibility.

It was the gardener of the garden of forking paths, tending an endless harvest. And it was hardly alone.

To every side of it, haquil became. Each movement it achieved another achieved differently or not at all and so another was added to the collective of itself. It had neither mother nor father but was and was simply because another of its number had taken a different path than it and since all paths had to be laid out it *had* to exist. If it came to be a second earlier or later it would be someone else.

And so, it came to be.

And it emerged before Kuty and Cala, stepping forth and explaining how when arisai created a residual other-creation was made, unfinished places like stories partly done, vaguely glimpsed other possibilities even the arisai did not know of. And these the haquil preserved like panes of glass in a cathedral tending to the unknown work of their maker's hands.

It also revealed the path ahead, the choices they would make that would lead them to some perfect end but then did not because in another universe it already had.

So, instead it merely placed an almost-hand against the stone-thin skin between itself and them and wished them luck and the betterment of chance. Then it glimpsed the bittered thought it had already said this too so cursed them but imagining this too it otherwise had done imagined what it was like to be a stranger in a strange land where the sun lingered not nor had time begun.

"I feel cold," Kuty said as unseen eyes watched the girl.

"I know, so do I."

Such a possibility the haquil did not intend but satisfied it had done something it went on its way again as the mosaic turned when no eyes were watching and a human-feathered

creature shifted in its gaze toward the emptied realm beyond as if seeing through the void then screamed and from the cliffs of Chaaronia shot up into the turquoise sky while below malachite oceans shattered into glass and imagined it had glimpsed itself in the mirror-smooth river of the water falling against the mountain stone, little imagining in another realm its name was Cala there.

It merely noticed it felt cold.

And by its side a raven-fingered creature went, lust-licking as a strangely burning child.

Chapter 15
A bright scorpion's tail so like a flower's bulb

Zenix is a world of green and gold jungles where each day insects are born, bred to consume the plants and each day also the plants are born, bred to defend and consume the ready-made insects.

And their forms shift as water, twist as glass melting in an inferno, countless variations of legs and petals, poisoned blooms, and bleeding acidic water pouring from bright mosaic armour to make ready a feast of the dead.

And the dead are never considered nor thought of and in the moment of an end even still there is no thought that anything lingers after death.

And night comes and night leaves and the world's wheel goes on again.

They wandered for a day now and hunger gripped them. They hadn't intended the caves yet there had been no other way and now they were trapped and the world just wider went, a world emptied of everything but stone.

"We could go back?" Kuty asked.

"No. It's alright. There's a way ahead."

Of course, there wasn't. None had ever ventured so far into the caverns and though it was a single path it seemingly led nowhere. Cala hoped there was some gateway to the upper lands but instead, there was just this long unseen light and an under-country widened till they could not see but a black decay above.

"A bright scorpion's tail so like a flower's bulb," she sang.

"Cala?"

"It's a poem the elves tell to one another.

The plains beyond are bright but deadly and all

the stones are venom-bled,
the seas are scarlet waters,
blood, and any who'd step upon them drown,

the hills beyond are bone-littered mud and even
the trees can slay or bend.
All things are beautiful but
deadly child, a bright scorpion's tail,
so, like a flower's bulb."

"Beautiful, but why do the elves tell it so?"

"To lead fear to fear and make them all stay in the forests of Valari. Though here the fool's truth is true and though beautiful there is nothing to sustain us."

Kuty sat on the stony ground and sat cross-legged, looking unknowingly at a country whose sun was scarlet-malachite.

"Sit," she said. And Cala did.

"Whatever am I going to do with you?" Kuty asked.

And Cala smiled at that.

"I don't know," Cala said.

"It'll be alright you know. We're going to get out of this Cala, I promise you that."

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

"'*I can still pretend the world will bend to me.*' Do you know where that comes from?"

"Your mother?"

"My father. The last words he said to her before he journeyed west. Tell me," Kuty asked, looking finally to Cala, "do you think he's waiting for me somewhere after death?"

"I don't think so, no," she said as she stood up and went to a nearby wall, her eyes turned from Kuty's own, "the arisai were quite clear on that. After death there is nothing. It would be cruel

to imagine something afterwards, spend eternity in some other place than one's own life, condemned to watch others while unable to touch anything themselves. Why?"

"Sometimes I wish I could pretend they're still there, somewhere, my parents, my people. But there's only me." She rose and followed Cala. "And because there's only me, I have to say this."

"Say what?"

"That we're going to get out of this."

Kuty then reached behind her ear and drew out the axe as it enlarged and became itself. She went to a nearby wall and started striking it. She didn't even know why.

She struck and struck and the sound reverberated through the walls and she was heard.

And they came as if in answer to their god.

The haquil watched as the hidden doors opened, the corridors which crisscrossed through their dominion, the doors none spoke of, and out of them came the servants of the long-dead storm-demon race.

Cala turned to see tiger-faced women striding solemnly toward her, their hands delicate as a human's but tipped of white-smooth talons, their long tails whipping behind them effortlessly, their sleek features smoothly turning toward Kuty who in shock almost dropped the axe.

The lead being came toward her, stared down at the axe in her hand and Kuty turned to Cala in a mixture of mute terror and shock.

Fifty of these beings were on their knees, bowing down before Kuty with a single litany on their lips.

"Behold the wielder of the gods' blade."

So they were taken in among the aarlis-arlistria, the tiger-folk.

The doors opened and the pair passed through an opened

aperture in the company of four others. And they could see now the 'doors' were passages which emerged from the stone itself and as Cala and Kuty passed through they glimpsed odd mosaics of places and peoples they knew not of and of beings in the stone shifting form as they stared at them.

Then another door appeared and they found themselves in another cavern, a rounded under-country and in the midst of this was a city unlike anything they had seen before. Ancient palaces existed of white marble and the pillars here were not smoothed but struck of grooves and the palaces and buildings seemed of an alien architecture. Of course, words like Rome had vanished before half the realms were born.

"What did we just see?" Cala asked one of the tiger-women and she glancing at her goddess ignored the girl.

"She asked you a question," Kuty said, and stiffening the tiger-woman replied, "It was the mirages of the haquil. They show us things and we watch and laugh at them and marvel at their ingenuity to create such marvels merely for ourselves."

"Then what we saw wasn't real?" Cala asked.

"Of course not! It was but pretence and folly. And we who know the truth know this truth certainly."

Uncertainly Cala agreed.

They passed white palatial buildings and were led into the palace and the widened throne room where sat a tiger upon a red-lion throne. Or a rough crude replacement of one at least.

And in all the time they walked Kuty made certain to keep the axe in hand so when the flame-fur-coloured woman gazed at the grey-dull axe she stood and marvelled and laughed in pleasure to see this possessor of a divine thing.

"Welcome and well met. I am Althrea Zomruiel, and you are . . .?"

Trusting the potential Kuty decided upon a bold invention of telling first of all the truth.

"I am Kuty, last of the kyrarai, daughter of Arlistriya, and

this is Cala Elfsbane," Cala winced at the affectation, "my companion and friend. We are pursued by the wardens and would seek shelter here."

Althrea stared at the girl. Orange eyes peered into her own and a mouth of needle-fine teeth revealed themselves one white glimmer at a time as the mouth opened wider and wider, seeming capable of swallowing her whole.

Then she placed her head upon Kuty's shoulder as if listening for something special within herself.

And then she whispered, "It is a wise child that knows their parent well."

And that was that.

In some click of machinery sliding into place, she knew that Kuty was indeed some trace of kyrarai, a last grasp of the storm-demons' own and so they were safe.

They were among the enemy of their enemies.

And is that not the safest place to stand?

Chapter 16
Islands in the sand,
gates of winter beside it

Zyrn is not merely the desert. The arisai who built Zyrn added to it four moons, Dranis turquoise-riven, the one most well-known, composed of endless green clouds swirling over a hidden inner world.

Those of Zyrn have bodies like threads, their bulbous heads spherically cast upward staring at the stars, bodies coiled like snakes slender as a stem who focus all their energy on those four moons, Dranis most of all.

And in their scarlet mythologies they imagined alien races, lost cities, spires of crimson glass and make of every thought a thought devoted to what they know not of.

And those of Dranis, what do they dream of?

They imagine all existence is just a few pale valleys, a small salt sea, and themselves. And nothing more.

Althrea marvelled at her god.

After so long in exile one of them returned, and yes, she seemed *strange* but she was truly a part of the old ones. This Althrea knew.

And she was so amazing. So incredible. She spoke eloquently of their travail through the upper-lands.

"We travailed the upper world."

And she knew so many more things than the elf which came with her.

"What is that?"

And she was so . . . alright, not beautiful, but they could fix that. The tiger-folk could change her back.

Sitting in their company Althrea watched the young goddess picking at her food and knew what she had to do.

She'd make Kuty truly kyrarai once again.

The palace where they ate seemed lit by a midnight sun yet like the other cavern could not find the source. Their host Queen Althrea seemed utterly fascinated by Kuty and the more she crept to learn the more uncomfortable the girl became.

Cala the aarlis-arlistria utterly ignored.

They sat about a rectangular table of white marble, the tiger-queen at the head, Kuty to her left, Cala just beyond Kuty gazing down at the rather bland meal. Though it satisfied it had no taste, no substance. It was like trying to devour shadows and only become partly satiated in the act.

"How did you get down here?" Kuty asked, glancing at the finely featured being and her flame-orange streaks of fur.

"During the last years of the fall one of our gods told us to wait here, mentioning that when the arlgith were in readiness they would retake the world and we would be relieved of our post. But the arlgith never came and the gods never returned."

"Why do you call my people gods?" Kuty asked.

"Were they not? Were they not the finest beings in all creation, the most noble, the most brave? They saw in us some glimmer of perfection and we went on to serve them in all things. I and my lineage have waited for you."

"Might we be excused?" Cala asked. She was ignored.

"Might we be excused?" Kuty asked. She was not and suddenly the palace emptied of one accord. Kuty had not even realized the edges of the walls were lined with them until their absence shook her to their truth.

Alone, (or hopefully so,) Kuty turned to Cala.

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know but I don't trust them Kuty."

"No more do I," she whispered. "There is something unsettling about them and their reverence for my peoples' past. At no point did my people ever imagine they were gods. Powerful yes, even arrogant, but . . .," speaking now so she might

be heard, “it is a shame the arlgith turned from their duties and yet I see the aarlis-arlistria have not. It is amazing to realize they have kept safe the old ways for so many centuries. I would be *honoured*,” at this a slight gasp coming from beyond the room, (so they were listening after all but had not heard everything she said,) “to know all I could of them, their history and their understanding of the storm-demons whom they served.”

Whispering now, her mouth by Cala’s ear, “We might have been safer in the empty chamber because I smell something on them Cala, something unclean. We must escape.”

“Your mother thought you might escape the wardens, yes? How did she expect you to manage that?”

“The same way I will have to escape the tiger-folk. Carefully,” she said, whispering as Cala had.

Suddenly Althrea returned.

“Come,” she said, “it is the time of kuludra when all the people gather together. I would be honoured,” mimicking the word brave Kuty spoke, “if you would join us.”

“Both of us would prefer to see how well the tiger-folk have done in the absence of their gods’ watching eyes.”

So, they left the palace, without knowing it heading west.

Baligostria struggled upward to stand. Algarda kept watch while his companion journeyed east to seek aid from their brethren, even unto far Bursania.

During the night and the following day Baligostria rallied, sang, deliriously wept over a place called Zanaan he had not known of before. The jewel poisoned him. Strange little thing, a grain of sand to such as them, less, yet it had drawn itself into Baligostria and was now feeding him a litany of souls.

He saw all of them in a glance. There were the monsters, the camps, and the time before and he watched and marvelled at them and swore and cursed and wondered why the jewel had done all this to him and not to the girl it had belonged to.

In his delirium, Algarda stood watch. There was a subtle madness in hearing his liege rave about the evil wardens who had imprisoned them to wither and dwindle like the last tides of a final sea. And then he'd rise screaming at the storm-demons in their own tongue, cursing them for their stupidity, for their blind adherence to Darsyap-Igel.

And then in Darsyap-Igel's dark voice, he'd speak about the logic which ran in the breaking of all things.

They were in an amphitheatre and they occupied the topmost row seated to each side of Althrea beneath a short canopy of marble.

Down into the dirt, some of the tiger-folk came dressed as the scoira or humans of old.

"What is happening?" Kuty asked.

"We enact the ancient war, the conquest to remind ourselves of our place in existence."

They're going to be killed, Cala thought, but then couldn't imagine why. They were tiger-folk and the numbers of the city couldn't sustain such a ritual. It was lunacy to imagine they were to die.

They didn't die. They were brutalized. Surrounded on all sides by tiger-folk in armour who wore ritualized wings like those the kyrarai possessed they struck and beat at the faux-scoira, the faux-humans, and then beaten to the ground they were taken away.

"The first act is ended and the second shall begin."

They were returned, wearing collars and chains, and forced to scratch at the ground while beaten while each scar was notarized and recorded in the eyes of all. There was no logic, no purpose, just a ritualized abomination, and where the first act had taken moments the second took four-sixteenth the day.

And after every few seconds, one of the brutalisers would step forward and begin to speak. They were speaking the words

of Darsyap-Igel. He had been the one who brought them.

"Don't you see Jalcaef, it's perfect." Baligostria was rambling in his half-unconscious state. He was taking the role of two kyrarai speaking, one whose name was known for so many hated things.

"It is so easy for us to do this."

"Why, we have dwelled here in safety for centuries Darsyap-Igel. What you wish is madness."

"How? Zanaan is gone, our numbers few, Candra can be taken and moulded as we wish. You know the arisai will not stop us, they *love* us too much, and they mourn for our dead company. I am tired of being among these mayfly-children who cannot know the touch of the void or sail the winds of the sun. We are stronger and strength determines morality. Nothing else."

"What if they fight back? What if they are able to subdue us?"

"I am liege, I am *king* here. And you will obey."

"I will not."

And just like that, a voice was silenced.

And Darsyap-Igel gazing from the red-lion throne licked at the blood of his own son and gazed at his subjects to do as they were told.

"Strength is the only moral certainty. He who had the strength is the god and nothing more."

The faux scoira in their leather bindings were beaten and forced to work while into the theatre was dragged a giant's foot by twenty of the faux humans as they laboured ceaselessly.

"See, even they can be killed. I would make all this in my image. I would make this creation bend to me! And if it will not, so be it. Other creations will."

"They're replaying the entire conquest in a day," Kuty whispered to Althrea. "Why?"

"To remember where we come from and to realize when the time is right, when the gods return, we shall be rewarded for all the suffering we've endured."

"But I am the last and I am not kyrarai."

"Oh, my girl, we will *make* you kyrarai, give us time."

Shuddered by the thought and the implications of the words Kuty turned to the ground below, then gazed at her friend.

The faux storm-demons struck at the wounded souls and then a faux scoira reached up and caught the staff.

"Here is the moment when it all went wrong," Althrea said. "The moment they fought back."

He was a monster.

Perhaps it was because he'd witnessed the last of his people on Zanaan and knowing this sought to make his people safe.

Perhaps it was because he suffered some form of trauma and so wished to enact the same on all creation.

Perhaps he believed some arcane path, some depraved truth which guided all his steps to this dark certainty.

Perhaps he missed breakfast one day, or didn't like being corrected, or felt he knew more, or simply wanted to prove his superiority.

None of those justifications mattered to his victims.

He was a monster and he led his people down a dark path.

The kyrarai marched from Calranus and in surprise, the giants watched their former colleagues as they ripped at flesh and bone. A hundred could subdue a giant and they had many times a million.

They crossed the Serpent Mountains and imprisoned the Hive-Mother and made her children into slaves. They raped with spear and blade and made of flesh a ruin. They impaled a forest of elves then set their broken bodies alight and afterward made

the survivors build, breaking them with every step they took.

And in all this, the kyrarai did not rebel. He was a monster and they followed because they feared to do any other thing.

It's hard to imagine a century in bondage. Words fail. One can describe, one can attempt, one can whittle down a million lives to one example and paint with careful brush those horrors but it is impossible to adequately say everything.

Words fail. If they didn't one might share such sufferings perfectly and none can. Existence is a singular pursuit wickedly arrived at.

How had they lost?

When one of the scoira attacked a kyrarai upon the Orsane plains and in rage and fear struck he caught the storm-demon in the chest, in the exact spot it was most vulnerable. And it died, the moment captured as unto amber when the other slaves saw and the storm-demons saw and before they could react the cowed populace rose as a flood.

A century of absolute power had rotted them to the quick. Perhaps some just wished to die and be ended of it.

Only Baligostria would know for sure and in his delirium could reveal only partial scraps of it.

And the giants walked, his people released from their long imprisonment and then the slow recall of a ruined carcass of a being limbless rotting on the sands screaming at his impotence, cursing all of them.

But he was a monster yet even as he was broken on the sands.

And in all this, the tiger-folk stayed loyal, when the arlgith turned away, when the vampires fled, when the jalal slunk to the plains to be rid of their evil creators the tiger-folk stayed loyal, they who once ruled and bled the lives of other worlds.

But their loyalty was undeserved.

Not once did Darsyap-Igel even remember them save as

blunt instruments fit to be used and tossed away. Were their god here he would have slaughtered them all for failing to do more to save himself.

And what was worse? Kuty had never even heard of them.

After the ritual ended the three went down to the dirt below. Althrea wandered amid the ruptured traces of blood while Kuty and Cala followed.

"Marvellous, isn't it?" Althrea asked.

What can I say to her? Kuty thought. *Tell her the truth, lie, pretend?*

"It was abhorrent," Cala said.

Althrea turned to Cala and struck her across the face.

"Who are you to speak to me, child? I serve the gods, I serve the kyrarai and once I have rebuilt in Kuty her legacy we will retake Candra. We will rebuild, become stronger, just as they . . ."

And Kuty began to laugh. She laughed and turned to the dirt and the blood, turned to the deep gouges where the giant's foot had lain and she laughed and couldn't stop.

"Why do you laugh at me?" Althrea asked.

"Because we're the same, same error repeated twice. Do you really think I could become your liege?"

"I have the flesh-mechanics preserved from the time before. We could go down there, I could order . . . *order* you to go down."

"And I would say no. I would say no Althrea."

And she turned from the countenance of her god.

"You are the last trace of them, surely you wish to retake your legacy."

"What legacy!?" Cala was astonished at the anger. "What legacy is this? You broke the bones of your own people to remember a time when others were brutalized. How many times have you done this? How many years, centuries have you done

this!? *Why?* To serve my people, my people were monsters! Despite anything else, they were monsters and you have no right to worship them. They were cowards who followed a demon over a cliff to their doom!"

Careful Kuty, Cala thought. *Don't unseat the reverence of a god to its follower or we might be martyred.*

"And what would you have had us do? What outside of you was left?" Shaken Althrea turned from them. "You weren't there after the fall. You didn't see our kind torn limb from limb and tossed to the jalal to be fed upon. You weren't there when we had to build a city under stone out of fear of being exterminated. You weren't there when Darsyap-Igel turned to me and said to keep the people safe no matter what, no matter how. You weren't there. We had nothing left except the certainty we were right. Because if we'd been wrong, *we* would have been monsters.

"And no one wants to admit that."

"How old are you?" Kuty asked.

"I can still remember sometimes far back when the giants were called the galic, still remember when we fought the cadarai shad. They were partly flesh and partly metal; never understood how they achieved that. Saw entire fleets burning in the dark, silver crumpling into ash."

"How old are you?" Cala asked.

"I'm older than Candra, possibly a few others. I can still recall the arisai who gave me birth near the dawn of creation's beginning. And out of all that, that blood and death to know we'd made the mistake again. We couldn't. I can't. We await the gods' return, god's return, to make Candra better than it's been. I could have you imprisoned, you know, nothing is stopping me from doing that."

"Are the others like you?"

"Immortal? No Kuty, they are not. They are not like anything you could imagine. But I am. Oh my beautiful goddess I want to make you perfect, I want to see the form of my master

once again."

"But you predated them. You were created thousands of years before the kyrarai. Surely you had something before that?"

"Blood and the fire and the night and nothing more. So come," brightening now, or trying to, the mask of her joy replaced upon the age-worn features once again, "let us revel and rejoice in the remembrance of times past!"

"No!" Kuty said. "Let us not remember, and not like this. Tell me, in all your centuries of waiting if you could make a human kyrarai why didn't make yourself kyrarai instead?"

"It would be wrong for the worshipper to become the worshipped."

"Or is it because you're afraid of choosing your own path? End this. Stop being this and become something better. So says the word of your god. I don't need to look kyrarai for you to believe in me, yes? So, I say stop this and choose a better path."

And Kuty drew out the axe and stabbed it to the ground.

"So says the word of Kuty," Althrea said.

"Yeah, so says myself. I want you to know this. My people *forgot you.* All of you down here. You were lost and we didn't know. You owe us nothing. Take the axe if you want, make it a seal, a proof of your authority. Proof that a god doesn't want your worship. Become yourself."

"I could still take you below ground to the chamber, could order them to take you and they would without fail and you'd become kyrarai."

"I am kyrarai, I am the last of them and I don't need to be moulded in their image to become. I like this body Althrea, I like this flesh." Kuty turned to Cala and smiled. "I don't need the rest. I know who I am. It's time for you to let go. Time for both of us."

"I obey."

"No. You choose. I have no authority over you. You decide."

And Althrea wandered back over the centuries, even her

times standing in the pit as guard and slave, trying to hope against hope this time it would prove their devotion and the kyrarai would return. How many centuries had they stood waiting at the walls for the well-worn sign, waiting for this axe, this key to hammer home their path back to the kyrarai?

And before? When the tiger-folk held dominion over countless planets, ruled jungles and fire and cities built on bright spires of stone, subdued by the kyrarai and tamed because the kyrarai had nobly protected and once defenders were, once friends, they could not turn to become a blackened thing. And if they did? They could not. Or so the logic ran.

"I've waited too long," Althrea said. "Keep the axe."

And from each street, the tiger-folk turned toward the walls.

Kuty and Cala watched as in one body, led by Althrea, they turned toward the walls and the doors opened but they did not pass through them. Instead, they touched them and the haquil placed almost-hands where the tiger-folk placed their own and suddenly the lost strands of their lives were taken up and added to the whole.

And those ghosts left lingering in the dark were suddenly scattered to each of one of an uncounted number of worlds and universes, beings who had stayed hidden in the dark-below.

And a human-feathered bird glanced to see strange creatures drinking by malachite waters which hadn't been there before as suddenly all thought of the storm-demons were gone and in these endless places they forgot their labours and became freed instead.

"She must have been holding them here," Cala said.

"I guess so, but how?"

"What do you think just happened?"

"I have no idea Cala. I just wish the wardens could let go so easily of us."

And in another creation lay the islands in the sand, the gates of winter beside it as unknowingly an echo of Althrea wandered on in some foreign shape, occasionally wondering at the countries beyond and the endless seas of dust.

But nothing held her back.

So she started exploring the new territory she was in.

"You do realize we are still trapped down here?" Cala asked.

"I have a suspicion there's a way out nearby."

"How do know?"

Kuty picked up her axe as it returned to a splinter behind her ear.

"Because how else did the tiger-folk drag the foot of a giant here?"

The pair slowly exited the tiger-folk city, continuing north, as beyond a great cavern loomed but amidst the unseen light Kuty imagined a shaft of daylight shot through.

"Are you awake?" Algarda asked.

Baligostria's delirium had ended.

"I am," he said.

"What would you have us do?"

"Go home." Baligostria turned his feet eastward and began the long march back.

"What? Why? We haven't captured the last storm-demon yet."

"Algarda I have poured their entire history in my veins. I have their entire legacy inside me now. I am more the last of them than she could ever be. And I say enough. I don't want to go pursuing ghosts anymore. In my sleep, I saw glimpses of the time before. We have spent too long labouring on the dead. I would be rid of it. I have ghosts enough in me, I'm sure. I don't need another."

And without another word, the giant headed east being

filled not only of the kyrarai but the galic's history. Strange word that, galic. He hadn't heard it before.

Algarda was torn. All his legacy was in the killing of the kyrarai. For a moment he imagined he could smash Baligostria's head, rupture out the memories, then realizing Baligostria was easily his equal in strength and more half-decided against it.

But he couldn't let go of the pursuit yet.

"Go on then," he said as Baligostria turned back. "Return to Bursania and say no more of this for I still have something to prove. The journey can't end like this, half-finished."

"Then I wish you luck," Baligostria said then spoke a word in kyrarai tongue and went on his way again.

And Algarda added, "Surely Kuty would know to free you from the jewel."

And Baligostria smiled and looked back once.

"I can see she knows nothing of this thing. All their knowledge I have and once given cannot be taken back."

"You are content to be a monster then."

"No one is completely a monster Algarda. And even when they are it's best to know, accept, and eventually forget. We have tried to hold them back and what has that gotten us? We have forgotten our names, the names of our people. I don't hold simply the legacy of our enemies but of ourselves and I would share that."

And he turned and strode away but not before adding, "The last of the kyrarai are dead. But we my kin we walk the living lands."

And like mist, he was gone.

In the port of Unulr they watched as the giants went their separate ways, the larger-headed one's direction going toward Setuka while the other headed north, climbing up among the Serpent Mountains. And a few pitying eyes in sympathy felt for them and those they hunted where the giants went.

Chapter 17
Meadow of the
house of oppression

The children of Acara dwell in a jungle and they are small and spiderlike, centaurs of eight legs while their upper bodies seem like women with their scarlet hair.

The dragons in summer they pursue, small golden worms they hunt for should the dragons achieve their second birth and pupate they become great winged creatures who hunt a single thing.

They hunt the children of Acara as they race the undergrowth, to remain hidden of everything.

Byrgirou had gone on walkabout. He had journeyed south and was now settled into the forest of Valari. His shadow was with him which he wished to kill. The skin of blackness slither-strode beside him, slyly mocking.

Or so he thought.

The elves gathered to him a time, each named after places which made or left unfinished lying in the void or philosophers conceived of whose philosophies none knew of save Byrgirou himself.

And his shadow of course.

The elves knew of Byrgirou, and how he had created their ancestral world. In the dim-lit labyrinths amid the oaks, elves sang a few brief songs, ancient lilting verses from their past.

Of course, the stories had altered, were rearranged, and none knew where the paths had been altered.

Pale-skinned women danced about him, (swayed more exactly and though they sang seemed to lack a certain passion even in the presence of their maker,) and the great black-bound books of old were opened and in a funeral tone they recited their old former litanies.

They knew each name of each vaunted figure, understood utterly, (or so they thought,) how each former king played into the machinery of the whole, and briefly Byrgirou pretended he was content.

And while he imagined so his shadow slipped sideways across the outer edges of the Serpent Mountains.

Suddenly he was plunged inward amid the caverns and was facing a golden wall which reflected at him a mosaic of forms. Of worlds.

Countries unfinished he knew not of. In some, he saw reflections of himself. And he was not alone. Trailing behind Cala and Kuty he followed in their step and suddenly here was a Candra where the kyrarai had never become such monstrous things or there a planet where the elves wept for the dead or here a creation where the arisai numbered in their counted trillions and the universe so filled of being it could not be sustained save in the making of more things. Form added unto form forever, joyous in their pain and in their sting.

And the shadow led the way to a single panel, a single frame of action and Byrgirou saw himself impaled upon a spear, the shadow above him, its ghost-echo pouring salt-venom to the wound as Byrgirou fell and was consumed of death.

And death left his lips in peace.

He had not felt Cala and Kuty themselves. If he had he might have pierced the wall just as they had turned upward finally finding the crevice to above. Instead, he recoiled backward into himself as the morning came along.

I must kill that monster, he thought grimly to himself as the shadow smiled a knowing smile and whistled a funeral dirge along.

The elves of course neither noticed nor understood Byrgirou's scented grief. And had he died suddenly they might have noticed, idly jotted down the details, then left their god to rot.

Chapter 18
They love me differently
or not at all

Walder is not merely sand. Each granule of it is alive and it can form itself to any shape. Each synapse of a dust-strewn aspect exists as but one mind and were it to take the shape of a giant or a worm or a blossom blooming from itself it has no other thought but to become.

And even out amid the stars separate from itself it still retains itself. It cannot be separate from the essence that it is or has become.

Baligostria strode the plains, avoiding the cities of the south. By edging to the Serpent Mountains, he avoided the scorpion dogs and scoira even as the venom remained. It could kill him or be killing him now but he suspected not. And anyway, the venom was hardly the most dangerous thing in his body now.

For a time, he wondered at what happened. There was a gap now, a **time before,** and a **time after.** In the **time before** the kyrarai occupied his every thought, their existence his existence tied to him.

But now, paradoxically in knowing them, in seeing every crevice of their being he lost his sting of them. Now they occupied a small chamber in the corner of his mind because it was not simply their history he saw.

He saw the galic and the talrano, the tiger-folk and the dreamers of Myr and the more he looked the more he saw until the entire canvas was laid bare. And they occupied only such a small corner of it all and there was so much he hadn't imagined to do.

I might be dying, he thought. But a deeper thought intruded. *I might finally be living.*

He spotted Hydraxaspe marching from the north. Hailing his companion, arms raised, Baligostria beckoned him and the

two met with Janderia in the distance beside the ancient walls.

"I would have words with you," their liege said.

"You hear their thoughts then?"

"No, but I see finally what they were. In the right perspective, I understand. I have become free of them."

Night fell as Cala and Kuty stumbled to the upper world while the pair of wardens gazed at the ancient moons ahead.

"We were called the galic?"

"Yes, buried in their history I see our people. We dwelled upon a massive continent of green malachite stone and built our cities from the bodies of ancient primordial beasts whose names we called aalga."

"Perhaps we had not forgotten completely with names like Algarda circulating our being."

"Perhaps. We were made slaves before but we endured, we kept our names and when that evil was removed, we persevered."

"Then what happened to us? Where did we go astray?"

"We became someone else. We forgot to return to what we were. We couldn't grow. But now!" He swung wide his arm. "Now we can."

"The others might not accept this. And Algarda has fled after them."

"I know. The knowledge might not flow easily but we have to know ourselves. We have forgotten too much. We have lost whatever we were . . ."

". . . in the aspects of our enemies."

"Indeed."

"What of the girl and the elf though? What if Algarda captures them? Should we not stop him or should we ignore their plight if indeed as you say you are the last one, not she?"

He had not considered that nor what Algarda might do. But the goal was so close! He could return and deliver what he had learned, he could heal them. It is what the kyrarai would

have done.

But is this what his people might have done?

"I had quite forgotten. We cannot abandon them."

"I know what to do Baligostria," Hydraxaspe said.

"What?"

"I will pursue Algarda and you will return home."

"You don't have to."

Hydraxaspe turned to the west.

"What sort of warden would I be if I could not aid my liege in his time of need?"

And as Baligostria slept, a sensation he still barely understood Hydraxaspe strode onward to protect his enemy.

They emerged into the upper world finally. The crevice had been easy to discern. Kuty had been right and now free of the lower world the pair were making headway.

But where exactly were they going?

This was no quest after all. They were no longer heading to the dwarves, following a plan which no longer fit. But what were they doing? Wherever could they go?

"We need guidance," Cala said. And food. The meals in the lower places did not agree with her yet. Whatever possibilities below evaporated in the morning light.

"Wait."

Standing on a sheer smooth floor of the high ground Kuty could finally see all the western lands, the green emerald of the forest in the distance, and the plains below, endless and yet unlike the country of her homeland for there was no tall grass here.

Far away a streak of blue mingled with red revealing the Fire Wastes and the oceans beyond them. All of this distorted in her view as if the whole of Candra were under glass.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Kuty asked.

"Beautiful enough. Tell me, wherever would you go?"

Without knowing why, she pointed to the edges of the Fire Wastes.

"Ah, the city of Nubla. If we get down from this peak it would be an interesting trek to go there."

"If we can get down."

As Kuty turned a shadow slipped against Cala's face and gazing up she saw something and without knowing why she ran.

Cala turned up and great winged creatures were swimming the air, reptilian things with long membranous skins stretched taunt along their arms and legs. And the twenty of them above were peering down at the pair below.

Cala ran to an outcrop of rock as the thals winnowed in the sky and screamed and then downward swooped toward them, their needle-fine teeth sharpened toward all flesh. And they would have no difficulty adding Cala's and Kuty's to their own.

They were not like the arlgith or tiger-folk. These were thals and they owed no allegiance to anything, not themselves. There would be no words spoken here.

Only blood and bone and steel.

"Draw forth your axe Kuty," Cala said in shadow, "and prepare to fight or die."

The twenty landed upon the flat high ground and arrayed themselves about the outcrop. Zar Zaradan glared at the pair and motioned with his head for some to turn left and some right, then on his scale-encrusted legs he sprang forward.

No words were said.

Five golden blades swam the air and felled three while the upraised claw sleeked inches from Cala's face. Kuty still unfamiliar with the axe drew it up and back, then spun, (the axe felt light as a leaf-carved feather,) and the grey-silver metal bit into a thal's neck.

There was no scream in this, no grief, not yet. The broken pieces would mourn, later. For now, there was but the attack.

In the grim shadow claws raked at skin and Kuty's face was cut but the axe sang into skin and bit blood and more blood of old victims was added to the cold steel then. The blades hit their targets and finally, Zar Zaradan raised a hand and without a second's thought they gathered up their dead and set sail to the sky.

And only then they screamed defiance as if at world's end.

Afterward, Cala bandaged her face and plucked up the lost daggers upon the grassless upper-lands.

Still gazing skyward, the pair went to the northern lands ahead.

In the tower of Hedar Zar Zaradan prowled. His name, the name chosen, had been used by each of his predecessors. His identity was the same as each before though each before had died.

And at his death, his body would be gathered to his people and another chosen who would have his name but in some measure not be like he was. Such was the nature of the thal. They mourned and they became; an unbroken chain without beginning or end.

A few had been taken and now they would have to be replaced. He scratched at the wound and a fire grew taunt in him.

They had managed to attack and defend. His kind had grown complacent in the upper-lands.

But the flesh could not go south. They would have to go north, into his lands.

In the dim-lit labyrinth of the tower, he sat upon a throne whose name he had long ago forgotten then decided to rally his people to the task.

And had he been told her origins, of where her people came, he would not have cared at all.

The kyrarai did not matter to him.

She was just a piece of flesh to be consumed.

And all the time Algarda journeyed north, prepared to fulfil a promise he did not fully understand.

Chapter 19
For some people dying in slow motion is an aphrodisiac

Remler was of forests and valleys but such have often been said before. But upon Remler knights stepped forth. In silver armour they duelled against dragons and dark lords, warriors honour bound to defend and serve, a realm of princesses needing rescue, of knights forged in battle sent.

And all of them desired one thing; to be rid of it, rid of the honour which prevented them from imagining more to life than this.

For some people dying in slow motion is an aphrodisiac.

Donegal was standing upon the Shadow Planet having taken a new form, not of manticore but man. It seemed fitting yet he couldn't claim why. His creation hummed with a brief electricity and he knew then.

All things in time had to come to an end.

"You must return!" Byrgirou screamed at him. "You can't do this! Not to me!"

But it wasn't about him and both gods knew. The gates closed that he might be alone and as he did, he turned to his own blue form sprawled upon a black continent. He breathed the dark decay and felt himself slip. This was to be his last act. Of course, he needn't take this course.

A shadow slither-strode to him and he noticed as it came.

"Hello," the shadow said.

"Hello," he replied, "care to sit awhile and wait out the end?"

"Delighted."

And the two sat and chatted a time. Oh, the shadow would endure. It always did. It was not merely some part of him but a part and portion of all their fears and hates and lusts. In

another age one might call it an evil thing.

Donegal smiled and offered the so-called evil a cup of tea.

"Are you not afraid?" The blackness said.

"I am, but I must be brave. I must accept."

"You could rebuild, you could start again."

"I am starting again," Donegal said, "in doing this."

"Why do you mourn them? They needn't die. It's a foolish mistake for them to perish for no cause."

"They have caused destruction and they feel they must atone."

"Could you not atone them? Are you not their god?"

Donegal smiled then.

"Who are you to speak of gods? I am. I exist. I will be gone." He winced in pain. He had created in himself something new, something impossible for his kind. He created death.

"But you could start again."

"I am. I am doing something my people must understand. We are not promised forever. We are only promised ourselves and cannot be other than we are."

"If you were someone else you would not be dying now."

"If I were someone else, I would already be dead."

"Byrgirou will grieve you and your passing. It will blister black in him. He may lead the others over a cliff to their doom."

"It is not in grief he will blister but just in trying to keep everything safe." Donegal finally stared at stars black as obsidian in a night which only he could see. "We are not promised forever so I would die as I am."

And he felt the electricity of his creation fade then turned to the shadow one last time.

"If you fear for him so badly make up some lie."

"What?"

"Tell him something, pretend to be myself, make him do something which will unseat the weight of grief off his shoulders. I would prepare. I am trusting my self to you."

"Can you trust me to do the right thing? I could deceive even in deception."

"Are you not the worst part of me? How could I not trust you as myself?"

And with that, Donegal strode a few feet then collapsed to the black continent. Dead as his creation was.

And the shadow became him then as the gates opened and Donegal/shadow smiled, seemed almost to salute the old-father and then began to mention something about a ring . . .

Chapter 20
Perfume-scented gardens of the scarlet moon

Rhom was emptied long ago. Once knights dwelled upon their surfaces racing on steeds of steel. Once rivers of oil burnt and knights in blunt leather crossed the great emptied plains, dwindling down to nothing. And no thought of them remained.

And when the last of them died upon his lips was written an ancient prayer, of earth which none spoke of. Of earth.

Little knowing such had been the former name of their dying world.

Yyaalis gazed upward at the sky. It had an odd scent to it like perfumed wine and she was standing in the city of Bnyr Berith B'nyr and was alone.

She could feel Donegal die off in the black continent of his own. She could return if she wished, go back along the doorways to Byrgirou and her kin, but she couldn't.

Something held back her hand.

A few of her kin had gathered and were staring at her crossing into death, gathered and staggered like statues upon some farther shore on the other side of the world's end. Then as ravens, they flit into the dark and were gone again.

And she imagined ammonite coils in fossil seas and the sound of bone-lutes playing and the way the sun glistens along rivulet fingers of stone and all of this, in all of this she was alone. And Myr, Remaliah, Xara and the others lingered on and her own creation was cast off from it and sealed like that of her brother's.

And she mourned. It was a strange feeling to mourn, to grieve. Those of Myr did not grieve, those of Remaliah grieved for everything and those of Xara? She could not tell, save that the name of the created equalled the created itself, as if that explained

anything.

But she grieved for this. She grieved for them.

"And why is that?" a black shadow asked. It slither-strode up from the wine-salt sea.

"Because they are gone you foul little stain," she said.

"You could bring them back perhaps, if you wished. Or choose another path."

"Has Donegel chosen other than this?"

"He has, he has decided to forgo his death and has escaped to Byrgirou. You should go with them."

"Blasphemous little liar, leave me as I am."

And the shadow smiled and sat upon a stone, gazing upward at the scarlet moon a time. It was strange, in sunlight or in shadow the scarlet moon remained. It was unchanging even as all creation changed.

"I'm not the villain here you know," the shadow said.

"And what are you then, since we two are together and alone? Since all else is dead?"

And the shadow paused and spiderlike grinned then stopped itself and tried to begin again.

"I am that which you need, that which sustains you. I am your desires, your lusts, your hates, your jealousies, your cancerous monstrosities, which all of you need if you are to survive.

"I am your wrath, your idle pools of idleness, your envy and your gluttony, but I am not this. I am not your despair."

And Yyaalis laughed bitterly.

"Think you I despair?"

"You are standing here waiting for death and count it noble, as did Donegal, and why? I ask this question, why, what is so noble in the nobility of death?"

"We failed, he and I. We created all this and it collapsed and burnt to ash by merely brushing against each other. Surely a creator should do better than this?"

And the shadow paused and began to write upon the sands.

"What are you writing there?"

"The history of everything," the shadow said.

And the shadow wrote **the beginning, the middle,** and **the end.**

"There, I have explained the universe to you. Ah, but I missed a detail, let me add it."

And then the shadow added **start again.**

"I suspect our kind will start again. Byrgirou will lead the others to create a perfection I cannot imagine."

"He will not. He will stagnant like a pool of bog-encrusted water and lead them to extinction. Save him. Return."

"I am . . . afraid . . . that won't be."

And death entered her and unafraid she felt its sting then never felt its sting again.

And the shadow stared at the scarlet moon imagining a perfumed garden there but lacked the strength to create anything on its own so instead it mourned as it had mourned Donegal then buried the god in the earth and wrote her life upon the sands, watching them tumble into nothingness by the wind.

Then he wrote again.

There was nothing else to do. He had to start again.

Chapter 21
The reluctant god

Golain possesses a single city separated from the sea by a mountain ring of grey which shields even the scent of water from the emptied dwelling place.

Of course, life must have water to sustain yet the city was forged here between the northern sea and the southern desert with an impassable wall between.

And since time was an added affectation those created imagined all before had somehow survived. Without water.

Now all that remains is a small lizard in an even smaller ghetto, a green king surveying a kingdom he cannot truly see while the logic of all before led to their ruin because nowhere in their entire mythology had they ever seen any before take a drink. And this alone would have saved, perhaps, had they a word for water.

Cala and Kuty felt themselves pursued. The thals were a force recalled but barely understood. They had been created like the others but something here had gone wrong, or, if possible, more wrong than originally attempted.

Throw a body to the arlgith and they would die, possibly, though there might be conversation first. Among the jalal certainly an excellent chance for death, an almost certain road, but usually if one were brave or clever or proved oneself to fear neither them nor death the jalal might enjoy the chase and at the very end grin a savage grin as if all life were the flipping of a coin and then decide, perhaps, just perhaps they'd kill you another day. Or not. Jalal were fickle. But they were not ever cruel.

But the thal were known only for this. Enter their realm and you would be consumed. No speech, warning, or wicked hate. Just this. A talon bright as a shimmering sun, a venom-encrusted mouth and nothing more. And none knew why. It

seemed they were honour bound to kill as if in their very souls was written a singular command.

Cala scanned the skies and crept edgewise through the rocky corridors between, Kuty scratching at her right ear subconsciously where the axe lay.

And all the time Zar Zaradan had taken to the sky, so far out of reach no eye could notice him. He had sailed upward, rising higher till the ground was a canvas without distinction, until only eyes as finely tuned as his could see anything above or below.

The mountains became a flat plain, the flat plain a parchment sheet, the ocean rolling lines of surf and tide.

All thoughts consumed to the ground, to the axis of the continent, and all things scattered about.

There. His eyes probed to see a blond shock of hair, a few dark curls in a summer wind, four arms, two heads, the glint of gold, a splinter of grey silver nestled behind a young woman's ear.

He had them. And like a thunderbolt he fell.

The shadow skimmed the ocean awhile. Byrgirou had gone walking among the ruins of the jalal and the shadow decided to stroll the reflected under-surfaces of a blackened sleep. Nearby he heard the turning of the vampires of Moravan and considered the sleep not black but bright.

Under the ocean were creatures massive and aloof, whale-dogs lapping at gardens of white coral, six-legged scorpion-fish radiant as a sunbeam. He idly chatted with them all.

So long ago he had chatted with so many different things.

There was a name.

The shadow slunk a tendril of a head up as if his idyll was replaced by fear.

Darsyap-Igel, the still voice said.

Ah yes, he had had such conversations long ago.

"And I ask you," he asked the ocean-wide, "why, why do they linger long after all of this? They pursue and tear and tread and weep and I ask you why?"

But the ocean could not answer him.

"And of course none of them imagine it might be possible all they consider true was false and they might never have been such a creature as they think they were. Why can't it be that all of this was prologue, the earth merely created in a day, and all the atrocities forgotten because they never were?

"Why couldn't it be this way?

But the coral could not answer him. Nor could the beasts.

He had had the conversation with himself, last words of a broken thing impotent and terrible and it should have been enough . . . But wasn't.

After Donegal's death, he had gone on walkabout going to and fro through the worlds, and for whatever reason he rested where the hated monster was and chatted with Darsyap-Igel as he in his last moments rallied at his people, the shadow, and everything.

And it would be easy to say he was afraid or deceived or perhaps some sickness caught him wicked. But he was a monster surely. Surely? There was no reason why. Surely. Surely?

"You don't have to die," the shadow said.

Darsyap-Igel was straddled to the water's edge as the sun kept pouring down and pouring in. It was the last day of their last war and the arisai had not intruded and now the kyrarai were confined and they in their last act of contrition had broken him.

"What must I do?" the demon asked the shadow.

"What if you could start again?" The shadow crept closer to the ruined body and idly licked at the wounds the black decayed thing wore. "What if you could simply start again? Would you?"

"You mean if I had the chance to make certain we never fell but ruled all this forever?"

"You simply don't understand. You know," the shadow took the form of a scoira then, disgust creeping now down the kyrarai's throats', "I have gone throughout the universes seeing so much, but you are an anomaly I don't quite understand. The closest I have come to is a subtle logic of the arisai, but you are broken in a splintered form of thought I do not fathom."

Darsyap-Igel laughed.

"What don't you understand?"

"Why, given all you are, all you could have been, did you choose this?"

"Because I could," the kyrarai spat. "I knew the arisai would not interfere and I had the chance and I took it. I ruined and destroyed because it was my nature to do this and nothing more than this."

"And the others? You led them over a cliff."

"They were not strong enough to stop me and if they had tried, I would have ended them."

"The definition of evil is to do unto others with impunity what one wouldn't want done to themselves. But look at you now, about to die, your name become watchword for cruelty, your people on a road to death."

"So be it. I have been true to what I am."

"Have you?" the shadow asked. And in a moment, it went scattering among the kyrarai, wandering among them and their thoughts. There was the terror of their exile but beneath this the realization of their evil. Some once loyal had taken up residence upon the shoreline, gazing backward to the water and the giants who stood upon the further shore who would not ever leave or let them leave.

Children, small scorpion tails whipping in frustration and terror idly stabbed at their flesh, poison ebbing into everything.

In the lower labyrinths were the bodies of kyrarai whom Darsyap-Igel had been displeased with and across the waters untold millions lay asleep in a broken death. And it would be so

easy to imagine some justification, but there wasn't.

I did as I wished and none stopped me, even unto death.

And the shadow returned then.

"If you could undo it, would you? If you could start again?"

"Why not ask all of them?"

"I'm asking you." A flicker of the total brutality gave way; he was in a camp labouring and being broken, no, he was bred of wings and claws, no, he was a tiger-folk taught to obey even as the barbed point betrayed his flesh, and in all of this Darsyap-Igel felt nothing save anger at not completing his task.

No, he was a thal bred to hunt anything not himself, each form and tincture of himself reflected in his brethren while anything else was lesser and deserving of being destroyed.

"I have made all this the way I wished!" Darsyap-Igel cried out at last. "It is mine and it will never be anything other than I intend!"

And the shadow laughed at this.

"Why do you laugh? My name is a watchword for cruelty, I am the god here!"

And the shadow picked him up and sped to the Cyas Caves while his body remained embedded to the sand.

Amid the bright shimmering walls the haquil walked, some now having great massive black-void eyes and slits of mouths, others walking with trailing peacock feathers of wings behind them.

One of them, Riarndreia, turned and watched as the shadow came and brought Darsyap-Igel to the place.

And the shadow showed Darsyap-Igel *everything*.

Each variation of Candra came to view and indeed some were ruled by the kyrarai, and others not.

But the totality of all the kyrarai had done equalled barely anything in the vast sea of eternity.

The sheer variety of paths eluded the kyrarai as suddenly

all was ice, or fire, or the xi ruled or the elves, suddenly he was a poet, a slave, suddenly he was born of another thing, suddenly he was contrite, and he saw himself broken on the sand weeping and weeping and unable to stop.

Each turning of a possibility the shadow showed him and without form or flesh the essence could not turn away.

Enough, he cried, *enough!*

But it was not enough yet.

So, he thinks himself a god, well then, I'll show him his divinity.

It came and kept pouring down and pouring in until the essence became bloated of lives and existences. And still the shadow wouldn't stop. Each tear, each longing touch, each sad farewell, each lost life was poured edgewise into it and still it was not enough. It had not been enough to brutalize him, to rob him of limbs or wings or flight. There was no curse, no hell, no after-spent where the books and tallies were added up.

No justice. No peace.

The arisai had not interfered when they could have nor had the xi and he would have words with them later, would convince them to interfere and they would obey.

But here? Here the tyrant was thrown every possible reality, every iteration of the wheel and he screamed and screamed and wouldn't ever stop and the shadow pushed him into the wall, into an unused part, an empty space, and let him watch each possible configuration of himself.

To find grace. Or so the shadow lied to itself.

Maybe when he returned to that spot at some future date, he might even release him from the golden glass. Or not.

The shadow was fickle but seldom unkind.

Riarndreia turned and with void-black eyes came forth, watching the creature screaming on forever and turned to the shadow as it slither-strode away, hearing small echoes of words bubbling from its mind.

Words like "ring," and "lie." And while all its kind strode

from wall to wall and mosaic to mosaic Riarndreia slipped along a portion of itself unknowingly inside.

For the haquil are fickle and are all things besides.

Like a thunderbolt, the thal fell.

Cala could see it coming and drew her blades. Eye to eye met and Cala tossed the blades upward hoping to end the creature aright. But throwing a blade straight up was difficult, momentum lessened at such angles and the thal tossed the golden glimmers easily away.

Zar Zaradan crashed into the pair of them or tried to, but Cala pushed them out of the way at the last second. The others scrawled back but their leader did not.

Unable to change his nature he followed his instincts to attack any not himself and now he seemed a black smear upon the stone. Stunned the others stared as before they realized it Cala had drawn all the other blades hidden in her garments and finding their hearts began to cut them down.

Cala was not fickle.

With unerring aim, she ended them and the thals died.

A few returned backward to the sky but those that perished on the ground she went to later, drew off her knives from their bodies and briefly felt a tinge of pity for them.

She did this because she watched as Kuty bent over Zar Zaradan's body and actually apologized for his end.

And then the pair went on their way again.

Chapter 22
Oh the places you'll go to and the people you'll see

Spindrift is a crossroad between. Were one to travel from Myr to Remaliah they would reach Spindrift first where the perfumed air and the bone bazaars are, where merchants sell everything of every kind.

Of course, once off Spindrift one forgets they were ever there and would not know they'd been there save the purchases in hand and all the rough-edged dreams they might have had.

The tower of Hedar had been oddly easy to escape. Zar Zaradan died so another was needed to replace him and without a head, the body could not act.

The square tower the pair avoided and continued heading north, looking for a way off the Serpent Mountains.

The only food they now possessed they possessed from their enemies. Just as the thal would have eaten them Cala had sliced apart one of their number, and brought the flesh with them. It was strange to realize they would recall this being as unwittingly the one who saved their lives.

She doubted he would have accepted such a legacy.

The rocky pathways continued northward and after an eight-sixteenth day's walk, they noticed the sky was clear of the thals completely.

Kuty was about to mention their good luck when a cobra peered up and skittered toward them from the shadow of a boulder. The cobra itself, wide-hooded, green-grey-bodied, was not the astonishing part. Nor was it astonishing when two small, scaled arms descended from the body ending in three small claws.

Nor was it astonishing when it spoke.

But a small cobra with two arms speaking from a human

mouth with an utterly human face shocked the pair utterly.

Cala knew what it was though. A saima. Still, she was astonished by what it implied.

The Hive-Mother was nearby.

"Care for a game?" the shadow asked.

Byrgirou had gone to the Cyas Caves. He had detected the shadow's scent there and having little else to do was following his steps.

En route he noticed Algarda wandering north. His compatriot had not followed far enough to be seen yet.

Within the caverns Byrgirou glanced at golden walls, the shadow still pursuing.

"No," Byrgirou said finally, "I do not want a game." Strange that he had walked the distance. How long since his feet had touched the ground? But flying was beyond him now and so the reluctant god had raced, a crimson blur athwart an entire country afterwards.

He strode the caverns and an odd familiarity greeted him. Briefly, he imagined something was here, some subtle otherness he couldn't quite comprehend.

Perhaps he would in time, but not yet.

He scented his quarry in the pit.

They had come here. The scent was recent, a day perhaps, or less. Turning to the shadow behind him he raced ahead and at the wall where the scent pooled, he scratched at it and the door opened. He glanced up at the mosaic but in his determination ignored them, pretending they were nothing important.

Even oblivious when another Byrgirou stared at him.

Give it time, the shadow said to himself. *He'll get it eventually, just not yet.*

Past the corridor of the city and the giant's foot was the further cavern and past the cavern the way out.

And he was running faster than any man.

"Chess?" the shadow asked, pursuing him. "We could play chess. Or shogi? Xiangqi is nice, perhaps that?"

"Do not keep me from my goal," Byrgirou said.

And all the time he raced Kuty and Cala were being led ahead.

The saima led them to the Saimas' Tower and curled about the circular realm were the stone-carved coils of a serpent, its head nestled near the top.

The thals never intruded this far north. They dared not.

She wouldn't ever allow it.

They were led into the tower and down below they came as thousands of saima raced about. No words were spoken which they understood. This far below the saima illuminated themselves, their language colours and patches of pitch or bright or blue, a silent language broken only by the unspeaking of them as they spoke only to each other and could not otherwise articulate a sound.

And at the bottom a rumbling thunder was heard.

Algarda decided the only way to stop them was to head north. Simple logic really. But how far north should he go?

It had been so easy in the time before. Good and evil existed and he was good and all else evil besides. Not only was he good but each possibility of him had likewise to be good. It was good to slaughter the kyrarai and therefore the kyrarai were slaughtered by him. Because he was good.

He marvelled at the endless perfect logic of himself.

"All the kyrarai?" a voice asked.

At first, he didn't know from whence the voice came.

"Bob-Durodonium?" he asked. It sounded like his old friend he thought, even though his old friend had died.

And a small black smear came into view. It crept from the mountain and in the distance was the Saimas' Tower and the

shadow rose to his height and spoke again.

It did sound a bit like Bob-Durodonium too really.

"Hello," he said then briskly headed on as if such things happened to him every day.

"Hold Algarda, I asked a question of you, I would have an answer."

"Well to be fair that wasn't a great question. All the kyrarai, what? You're not very grammatically refined and I would consider it impolite for a being to get into my head. It's not very crowded but it's mine."

And the shadow grinned then said, "Alright, I'll ask the question fully; were all the kyrarai deserving of death?"

"You sound like Baligostria and I don't know what poor thing happened to him. Hmmm, let me guess, you're something much older and more powerful than I?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"Good, then I would have words with you. Walk with me," the giant said and without looking back the warden wandered on. Taken aback the shadow followed as Byrgirou pursued the pair through the maze of mountain roads, this bright cacophony of stone.

"Why have you come here?" a voice asked.

In the deep-below all was black but there was a green fire at the heart of it and the chamber's walls drew back and eventually Cala realized she could not see the end of it.

The green fire slowly ebbed and she realized it had existed simply for their benefit. In the down-below no light was except the green fire and her eyes.

"Don't move," Cala said. In the dark a few saima clustered about them with one intention; to make certain they would not fall in. For the chamber extended far below the floor and if one fell there was no escape unless she caught them and if she tried it was more likely one would die by the rough scales of her form

slashing to the bone.

"We were pursued by the thals and so came north."

"And before the thal?"

Tell the truth or lie, Cala thought. *Lie to her!? One slip of a word and all would be lost. But admit the truth . . .* ***what truth is it you speak of? One needn't use words to speak to me.***

"Before the thal were the tiger-folk, before the tiger-folk the giants. Before the giants . . . the ocean."

"And Kyos Isle."

"Yes," Kuty said, "I am from Kyos."

"Strange little creatures you are, tossed here and there going to and fro throughout creation. Do you fear me little elf?" the voice asked.

"Yes, utterly. Terribly."

"Do you fear me little storm-demon?"

"I am human and how can I fear you not knowing what you are?"

"Well answered. Let me introduce myself then."

Suddenly a yellow light came into view. It was massive, larger than a giant's eye and it was paired by another and the light was not completely yellow; bands of black interlaced between it. The chamber had not been defined clearly. At first, Kuty assumed it was as broad as the tower and the tower itself broad enough to house easily five thousand humans abreast.

But the chamber was not as big as this. It was so much larger. And down below the edge of the precipice?

A giant could have fallen to his death.

The yellow fires were too far apart. How were they being held up, and by whom?

Then Kuty realized they were eyes. The green fire came back to life again before the eyes and suddenly she was staring at a serpent's face, blunt snout, and fangs, each fang half as thick as the tower itself. Somehow in the lower space all space itself became distorted. Surely it wasn't as massive as this? And yet the

Hive-Mother loomed before them and Kuty's senses seemed not to deceive her.

"Do you fear me little storm-demon now?"

"Yes . . . I do . . . I must."

"Why?"

"Because you could kill me."

"An apt answer, but why would I kill you? Either of you?"

"Oh, there are so many reasons I can think of right now," Cala said.

The serpent almost seemed to smile a serpent smile and then she laughed, an oddly shattered sound like broken glass, delicate and sharp, but not cruel.

"Yes, I suppose there are many reasons to die. I would imagine there are better reasons to live though. Perhaps even a better life than mine. Do you know me little elf?"

"You are the Hive-Mother, one of the oldest beings in creation."

"Indeed. I was born on Myr, free to swim the oceans of dust in plenty, free to watch the ainyr wheel the skies forever. I came here with your people and oh the places I've gone to and the people I've seen. But now I have settled to the ground waiting for a better day ahead.

"Tell me, what do you think of all this . . . grief?"

"I don't understand?" both women asked.

"Ah, of course, I apologize. Most in listening to a story told hear one piece but not the whole. And if one in a story were free to hear all other parts then they'd know the logic, the plot, might even find it a bit repetitive now and then. So let us change the tale a moment. And now for something completely different, my friends."

And the serpent somehow placed the tip of her snout upon the edge and there was a flash of green light as suddenly she was no longer serpentine but seemed exactly like a naked elf, the tapping of her feet making an odd tattoo upon the ground.

Except unlike an elf her skin was a darker shade of blue.

"Come walk with me in the upper world," she said to the pair and without noticing if she was followed trod up the stairs.

Byrgirou wandered and found himself amid the thals. They had replaced their leader and now Zar Zaradan was flittering in the air and the great scarlet-headed god searched up his eyes to see a fleet begin their crash to ground.

And a voice in his ear said, "You could stop it now."

"So," Algarda said as the Saimas' Tower came closer into view, "what is your pitch? What would you have me do?"

"I would have you think about what you're doing here. Surely, they are no threat to you."

"Uh huh. May I ask you a question, being to being, truth to truth?"

"Of course."

"Just how fucking stupid do you think I am?"

"Okay, I hadn't expected that," the shadow said.

"You know Baligostria thinks me a fool, and so I imagine you do as well. But he led us here, he started it, I didn't. He began the road and we followed. I followed. Should I have turned back?"

"Your decision."

"No, it wasn't. It was his decision and mine to obey. Now I ask you since he claimed to be now a part of what he hated should I still obey him?"

"Why didn't you attack him?"

"Why would I? One against one, he stronger than I, but, and here is the thing, he's on his way home to be judged, tried, redeemed, atoned, cursed. What do I care? He gave me an order before he changed his mind and I have to obey it."

"You don't have to do anything. Surely not all the kyrarai deserved death."

"*What do the kyrarai have to do with anything!?* It's not about them, it's about me. It's about who I am. I am a good warden and I have been given a just order. Why does everyone care about them? I killed them and that was for a time the highest point to me. But not because of them, but because of me. We made a promise, an oath to our ancestors to protect and I will not fail that oath because someone changes his mind en route. He said how we lost our way. I heard it in his sleep. Maybe we have but we can't find it by throwing away ourselves to embrace someone we were. It was never about them. Not to me, and when they are gone only then our debts to our ancestors are paid. I'll not betray thousands of years of history because my liege changed his mind. But I have a question for you. Who are you? Why come you here?"

Now there's the rub, the shadow thought to himself.

"I have trailed myself with Byrgirou."

"Yes, thought as much. *You* were the one who wrote in the stone what the girl was, not him. You knew the truth and you set us on a merry little chase. Now after coming so far, you give me order to stop when you first gave order to pursue. Why?"

"The job is done, the task complete. Baligostria has done what I wished. He led them here. I had hoped Byrgirou would not come so quickly though. The goal was to have the pair stopped further along the path by the thals and then head south, the three of you pursuing but it seems no one gets exactly what they want."

"Well, what is it you want then? Tell me, truthfully."

And so, standing on the Orsane Plains the shadow began.

"I want the arisai to begin again, to create. They stopped and they shouldn't have. They have dwindled to nothing because of this and when Byrgirou dies I die with him. I'd rather avoid that fate if I were you.

"What am I? I am their lust, their greed, their anger, and I am their passion, their hope, their love. I was created at the same

time as Byrgirou and I was meant to be part of him, part of them. Instead, what happened? I was thrown out, cast out and stuck watching while they all turned one way or another, one disaster to another. Do this, don't do that, make it right, make it wrong. Make it perfect. But without me, it won't work and it would never have worked anyway. Perfection is just a shadow that doesn't exist."

"Ever told him all that?"

"Many times. He doesn't believe me."

"Why do you want him to find the girl?"

"He thinks she has something that will kill me. And he didn't come sooner because he couldn't bear to see them like this, even though he's dwindling now to simple nothingness."

"You know you could be an evil little thing."

"In any other universe, I might."

"Could be lying." Algarda stood looking at the forests in the distance. "Alright, what do you want of me?"

"I want you to let Kuty and Byrgirou meet. He's en route. I don't know what's going to happen after that. The end could be in an eighth-sixteenth of a day, or longer. I can only do so much. Whatever happens, I don't want you to kill her. Please."

"She's there in the mountains then."

"Yeah, with the Hive-Mother now. She, they survived the tiger-folk, better than I could have hoped for, and the thals. I don't know if she'll survive Byrgirou if he learns the truth."

"So, she could be killed anyway."

"Yeah, it's a real possibility."

"And your endgame is now?"

"Maybe. Possibly."

"You could simply force me to stay away."

"No, I don't have the power anymore to make anyone do anything. I can't force someone to act now and Byrgirou's strength is almost spent. Besides I only ever made one being experience something they did not wish. Anyway, I thought I'd

try the unvarnished truth for a change. This is my last gambit really."

"It would take me some time to cross into the Serpent Mountains to reach the Saimas' Tower."

"Yes."

"Even more if I go a little slow. Baligostria said to pursue her. He didn't say how long it would have to take."

"You know, they might not even be there when you arrive."

"So?

"You have to be true to yourself."

"What else could I be?" the giant asked, child of the galic race, and then turned slowly to the mountains.

Ever so slowly as he came.

Chapter 23
Bright gemstone blossom growing out of his seven-fingered hand

Jiniz is a world of spires where the fingers of the ground rise up and atop each piece it flattens and upon each is built a minor replica of the world where beings of green-grey skin trod like solemn giants, or the remembrance of giants, while bridges are spanned to cross all things together.

But the bridges are made of black-spider silk and all it would take to cut off a portion of Jiniz is a blade and the will.

"Everybody has a story to tell."

The Hive-Mother was sunbathing outside, Cala and Kuty following.

"You know if you tell a story enough times, enough ways you think that's the only way it is. Isn't true though."

"Why are you telling us this?" Cala asked.

"The dashing hero, the damsel in distress, the dragon, the quest."

"What is she talking about?"

"I have no idea," Cala said.

"You needn't whisper, your thoughts are laid bare like the pages of a book. I suppose in a way that's true though, what we are one to another. Books and stories without end. That's what the dreamers of Myr believed of course. Why they were so good at telling stories but why they were so abysmal at dealing with death. Hard to feel sympathy if you don't believe your creation is real."

"Does this have to do with the kyrarai?"

"Not in the slightest. In point of fact, last of to last of, aren't you a little tired of carrying all that? I mean we've heard the view of the villain, his victims, his followers, his creator, his

jailors, his tempter, his punishment. And, oh, of course, you don't know that Baligostria acquired the jewel, it's embedded in his palm. So, to be very technical about this you are no longer the last storm-demon. He is."

"How . . .?" Cala turned to Kuty.

"It's a library and I'll explain it later," Kuty replied.

"But you girl, you seem a little pale in all this, a little lesser. Though telling Althrea to choose her own path, brilliant. Utterly brilliant, I applauded you for that."

"You saw me then?"

"I see everything, everywhere. I see Baligostria returning, I see the xi flying in their ships of nightmare and light to the south while the dran-centaurs dragonlike eat the grass. I have seen every life and birth and death on Candra since its creation and I will bear witness to its end.

"I have seen Myr and Remliah, Xara and Jiniz, Golain and Rhom. I've seen it all baby, even terrible cliches like that. Tell me, what do you think of my children?"

"We hadn't even considered that, or them," Cala said.

"Well, they are mine and I love them. Doesn't always mean I like them but I love them. And because I love them, I'd do anything for them. Now why do you think I'm telling the two of you that? Oh well, I imagine you'll figure it out. Kuty. Now. *To business*."

All the time she had been speaking the Hive-Mother had been lying on the ground, her face pressed against it, now she strode up and went to Kuty.

"Ring," she said.

"Ring?"

"Of Korgius. Yes. Now. Hand it over."

"My mother gave me this ring."

"She did, and right now it is drawing the attention of Byrgirou to you. He thinks it will kill something he doesn't want to be a part of it, but it won't. When he learns this, he may

become *irate* and I have a suspicion I'd probably be able better to bear his wrath than you."

"But that isn't right, you shouldn't take this burden . . ."

"Enough!" the Hive-Mother shouted and stared at the girl. "No burden. My choice. Stop hanging on to old things. It's over, everything of that time has been said. Now, we are an old breed and it's time someone kicked him back into service, time to dust off the mausoleum and build a garden. And my child that someone isn't you. I would have words with him and this is my best chance to do it. Besides, I have a favour to ask. Nothing complex, no evil witches to slay or dark lords to kill."

"What's a witch?" Cala asked.

"Nothing important. Here's my favour. Get out of here. You were heading west before the giants intruded, well there's a giant coming east named Algarda and another to the south with orders to stop him. Don't ask why. Not important. Now I can get you two somewhere safe and I can also make him think he killed you. He does that his story is over and he goes home. Hell, if I make it seem accidental he won't even feel guilty about it afterward. What do you say?"

"I say I'd like to see the world."

"Good answer." And the Hive-Mother beckoned and two saima came and in an instant became mirror copies of the pair.

"Go west young men, go west, and when you see Algarda fall from the nearest cliff. Ah, don't worry they'll be fine, they fall all the time. Make certain he sees your broken bodies and you're set. Got it?"

"What do we do afterward?" one of them asked.

"Well either stay on the ground pretending to be dead until you are or come back. You figure it out."

And like that, the pair of them were gone.

"I love my children but sometimes . . . anyway, one second."

She went into the tower and came back carrying two

scarlet tear-shaped amulets and draped their bright chains about both women's necks.

"Teleporters. Old dwarf technology. Like to say it will be easy sailing but the things can only take you to the Ruins."

"We'll be fine," Cala said.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye then. Good luck."

And in a flash of blue light, the pair were gone.

And the shadow came to her then.

"How fares you old-mother?"

"Ah, it's you. A sight for sore eyes indeed."

"Byrgirou approaches."

"Yes, weaker than before but still more powerful than any living thing."

"That was quite noble of you, taking their burden from off their throats."

"Nobility had nothing to do with it."

As she spoke, she slowly transformed back into a snake, growing larger each second she became. "I forgave a lot of things in my existence, a lot of little and terrible grievances. But I haven't forgiven *him* his damned mistake."

A coiling mountain of flesh rose and circled round a finger of the mountain.

"I would have some *very* stern words with him."

"And things were going so well," the shadow said.

Had any noticed they would have seen etched inside the ring the shape of a seven-fingered hand, almost microscopic, and growing from it the gem-blossom of some foreign thing.

And buried in the blossom Riarndreia waited patiently.

Chapter 24
The temples of scorn

Charr is fire. It is composed of black continents of stone and oceans of molten crimson and there sits upon the throne of Charr a boy king. In the ancient legends he came first from a world of water, his mentor and protector an immortal assassin, a being cursed to never die but linger on until the boy upon the throne was cast.

From wooden ships to obsidian towers, from blue water to scarlet burning earth he carried the boy here and fulfilled his task and died at last.

And so, the boy became the king of all the world, with no one to protect him when he needed protection most since those who claimed to serve could with a whisper shatter him in the back.

Byrgirou turned to see Zar Zarada before him.

It was a strange sensation seeing his creation like this. They had fallen seeking to kill him and he awakened to something older from his past.

Before they had been turned to this the thals had been a species driven by honour. He could recall them walking between the stars and then diminished and cut down to this.

Instinctively he let go, the first time in thousands of years.

He attempted to truly add to his creation.

Zar Zaradan became of two minds. First was the initial sensation, the primary existence but then something else took hold, and without knowing why he knew it likewise had taken hold of them.

The thing in their midst looked down at the ground as if in shame.

And Zar Zaradan spoke for the first time.

“Who are you?” he asked.

"I am no one," Byrgirou said and started to walk on, his wings trailing behind him.

"We have been changed. What did you do?"

"Nothing, simply provided something your people once had. Something taken from you. Of course, if you want you can go back. I allowed you to experience this but you can always become what you were."

"What were we before?"

"Other than you are. But I doubt you'd be speaking civilly then."

And Byrgirou was gone.

The shadow crept up to Byrgirou along the path to the Saimas' Tower.

"That was incredible. You finally created."

"They weren't perfect."

"They're better now."

"I've just unseated thousands of years of history. They'll have to become used to a new way of being."

"You just released a people who had been encaged and let them wander among the stars again. As an instinct. Byrgirou, there's hope for yet." A thunder-rumble was heard. "Assuming you survive the next sixteenth day."

"Why? What do you mean?" And the Hive-Mother came to view. "Ah. What have you done?" he asked.

And far in the tower of Hedar flittering bodies lighted up ever ascending into the black beyond like temples built of scorn.

Or women made of song.

Chapter 25
Throat of the scarlet mind again

Xymth in all its forests are filled with dragons and dashing heroes and damsels in distress and neath a silvered moon all might seek rest but day to day they change, dragon unto hero, woman unto man, until one cannot tell how the quest first began.

The Ruins were aptly named. Cala and Kuty appeared in a blaze of blue light and to every side were decrepit articles of stone, failed temples of scorn, and structures built to service the glory of the dead.

Without waiting Cala turned west, quietly. Kuty following.

And Jysraeri Brehe followed and kept quietly following them.

They reached the edges of the blackened Ruins and then noticed a pack of jalal playing with a mosaic of bones.

Kuty had never seen such creatures before. At first, she assumed they were like tiger-folk but they were something else.

They seemed like panthers save the bat wings jutting from their shoulders and were on all fours, several in a pile struggling with the bones, and before she could react one bent over her head and gazing at her upside down licked the bridge of her nose.

And Cala was before her and didn't notice this.

Jysraeri Brehe looked into the soft pale eyes and wondered how the girl tasted, then realizing her own ambiguity in the thought moved closer to smell her blood.

Cala turned from her hiding spot to see a jalal perched on a slab, her head bent forward over Kuty's own and a terror shook her until Jysraeri Brehe looked up, and sighing with relief Cala crept closer to the pair.

"Hello old friend," Cala said.

"You know this being?" Kuty asked.

"Oh yes, she knows me well, but what are you doing here? It's hardly safe, we haven't eaten in some time."

"We could only come this way. It was beyond our control."

"Well," the lithe figure slid from the slab and turned the way the pair came, "follow me and be quiet. Otherwise, you would wander into a holocaust."

And so led by the predator the pair went on their way.

How was this supposed to end? the shadow asked himself. *How was this supposed to turn out alright?*

The Hive-Mother curled to her full height blocking out the sun. Byrgirou could see embedded in her fang the ring he sought for. She had it and she would give it to him.

"I seek my property now," Byrgirou said.

"Then come, take it old-father, for this is richly deserved."

"I have no quarrel with you . . ."

"You have a quarrel with all! You abandoned your creation when it needed you and you abandon it still! You feared making a mistake even when you did right. The thals are finally in repair."

"But not everyone!" he screamed. "I couldn't fix everyone, nor everything!"

"That was never your job, never your responsibility. It was never your task to set everything right, it was your task to obey your nature and create and let all things right themselves. So, create. *Try your best.* I don't fault you for this universe, I fault you for not continuing to try. How many endless lands could have been fathomed from the time of Donegal and Yyaalis' death till now? How many trillions of beings could have existed had you simply continued on? Including your own kin?"

"Give me the ring and I will set things right."

A coil of her body streaked the sky and crashed into the

reluctant god with all her might.

"First I'll set something right by my conscience," she said.

Byrgirou tossed the great coil from his shoulders struggling to stand. Then he struck, his body looping upward against her throat, fangs thrust into her skin, growing to her size with every moment of the struggle they were in. And with a toss of her head, he was thrown into a face of rock and as he did so two pairs of eyes noticed him.

Algarda saw Kuty and Cala die, saw them fall, (oddly from what seemed a safe position,) and now content he was prepared to go home when the thunder fell.

And Hydraxaspe had finally appeared, catching up to Algarda and now close together both could see the battle looming as all thoughts of the women ebbed.

"What do we do?" Hydraxaspe asked.

"We interfere," Algarda said.

"For whom?"

"I don't know but either side would be a glorious fight." And so, the giant strode forward as if to take no side but his own, Hydraxaspe following even unto death.

They reached the edges of the Ruins when the jalal caught the scent of them. Brehe knew they knew and almost turned to fight but by then Cala and Kuty were racing and she preferred to race with them.

Claws bit into the ground as bat wings drew back, a black tide coming, and Kuty almost preferred they had remained to stand against Byrgirou then heard the roar of something unhuman which streaked the sides of the mountains and seemed to blanket the very stones. And so no longer did Kuty desire she had remained at the Saimas' Tower.

Coils wrapt round his throat and Byrgirou struggled to breathe. Before he would have easily subdued her but his

strength was almost gone, (too much used to merely increase his size,) and she was enraged at him and he only barely understood why.

Then he felt arms grasping at him and noticed the giants had arrived.

At first, he imagined they had come to his aid then Algarda struck him across the face while paradoxically Hydraxaspe struck the serpent-mother of her kind. They were trying to get between to stop the fight or perhaps were simply eager to prove themselves stronger than either kind.

Byrgirou struck then, claws raking Algarda's face ribboning it but this did nothing to stop his ardour or his eagerness. His task completed this new task took up the whole of him and after listening to the shadow that this being had to create he decided he would provide him a new impetus. Byrgirou would create a means to live or he would not live at all. The giant decided he would make sure of that.

He was a good warden after all.

Hydraxaspe in comparison just wanted to stop them before they shattered the mountains into glass. The crag already shifted from the weight of Byrgirou thrown and if the two continued they'd rain half the Serpent Mountains into the valleys below.

For her part, the Hive-Mother just wanted to break something inside Byrgirou and had no interest in harming the warden at all. She lashed her tail out and struck Byrgirou, curling round the other giant in front of him then spit the ring directly at his mouth as it opened wide in rage and pain and he almost swallowed it. But didn't.

And here is where Byrgirou learns the ring won't do anything, the shadow thought. *And he thinks he was angry before.*

And in the Cyas Caves the haquil paused just once when Byrgirou took human form, took the ring, and placed it on his finger, imagining his triumph, and then the haquil turned back to

their observations of everything.

But they were watching also from the inside of the reluctant god now and in his triumph, he remembered something the shadow wished he had recalled.

Suddenly the Hive-Mother turned to a dreamer of Myr and with a flick of a thought the giants shrunk until the pair stood but a two-span's length long.

"I have it," he said, "I have it," and the shadow came forward, "and all your talk I will now put to an . . . end? What is that? What is that? That's Candra but it isn't, the mountains are inverted with the sea. Myr is red, Golain is abloom, Rhom has centipede princes thrust upon it." The human form of Byrgirou staggered forward, caught by the Hive-Mother herself. "What is this? What do I see? I see the girl, I see Kuty, she is saying something to me, to let go, there in the gallery of the dwarves, I see myself there, I see myself creating in the company of my children. They haven't perished yet. I see, what is this, *what do I see?!*"

"What is happening to him?" the Hive-Mother asked.

"I don't know," the shadow said and in Byrgirou's terror he relented and drew the shadow in, dissolving the shadow like sea foam on the surf . . .

And Byrgirou as a man collapsed to the upper world below.

Just before the other jalal struck something caught at them. Glancing up Kuty saw she was embraced by a thal as were Cala and Brehe as well. They said nothing and obviously Kuty could do nothing to them.

Then they had passed beyond the Ruins and the River Maijor and entered into the Fire Wastes.

A caravan was passing by, wagons moving slowly across the scarlet sands, and without words, the thals left them there and without words moved on again.

"What was that about?" Cala asked.

"I don't know but I think the Hive-Mother had something to do with it," Kuty said. And a man approached them and stretched out his hand.

"He's asleep," the Hive-Mother said to one of her children. Byrgirou-as-human had been taken into the Saimas' Tower and with him in his sleep went the shadow, his body placed upon a dais in an upper room as the sun came pouring in.

The giants had turned south by now, content of everything. Baligostria would be pleased to know Algarda had not had the chance to kill the last storm-demon but she died anyway. Perhaps
he would approve of that or not, not that it mattered anyway. The story was over now and they were going home.

Well, at least their story is over now, the Hive-Mother said to herself. *But whatever am I going to do with you, old friend?*

Chapter 26
My eyes have not the strength of summer days

Jiadic is a land of grass where each blade sings only to itself. Each thread knows the song it sings and can sing no other things, no other symphony, can become no other word. Until the grass is cut.

Then a new song springs from the old.

Byrgirou had come upon Jiadic. But it was not Jiadic as he remembered it. No grass but crystals and they sang a song of glass and he was no longer there but had arrived on Remler.

Except it couldn't be Remler. Forests yes, but of stone, and dragons yes, but the dragons wore armour and the humans were five miles long crawling on their bellies and the dragons hunted them with lances made of bone.

Myr? He came to Myr but Myr was not the creation he knew. Scarlet oceans grew then hardened into glass, then shattered, then became liquid again.

Remaliah? A desert of white coral. Xara? A mountain peak. Zenix? A jungle but of stony pieces scraped from the bodies of primordial things.

Nothing was set right anymore.

And then he caught himself being stared at. By himself.

And Byrgirou strode forth to confront Byrgirou at last.

"What are you?"

"I am Byrgirou."

"As am I."

"Where am I?"

"You have journeyed beyond the glass that separates reality from reality."

"How?"

"The haquil perhaps. Yes, I suppose one of them put themselves in the ring."

"Why?"

"None had probably ever done such a thing before. Simply put it amused them. Or perhaps . . ."

"Yes?"

"Tell me about yourself."

And Byrgirou did, there in a jungle of stone as whale-dogs about them walked.

And Byrgirou listened and he heard everything.

"Walk with me," Byrgirou said, and Byrgirou did.

And the pair of them had a talk.

They viewed the creation that had been made in ways similar to his own from whence he came but there were many more here. More than he could name.

And Donegal was alive. And so was Yyaalis.

"So, this is how all would be if they had not succumbed."

"Where is Hyalgaria Izelon?" Byrgirou asked.

"I do not know the name."

"When Donegal died, I brought him back, and she, and they in turn created Hyalgaria Izelon."

"What do you mean?"

"They died and in time they were restored. Many of my children perished in one way or another. Some died with their creation, some perished alone. One wished to become a sun and so blistered into oblivion and another sought become night. And she is just night still. But I tried again, I set my heart to the task and I brought them forth again."

And the shadow inside Byrgirou finally crawled out.

"Ah, hello there," Byrgirou said and the shadow bowed to him, "my shadow," the unreluctant god said.

"I have such a shadow as this, a plague upon me," and at this, his shadow too was freed and spent out into the reality

beyond.

And darkness gazed on darkness and abyss upon abyss.

And just as suddenly one of the shadows turned back and blended behind his eyes again.

"You could learn a thing from him," the shadow said.

And then his shadow also turned to him and in his thoughts, he heard the whispering echoes of his fears.

"How am I to return to my own self?" Byrgirou asked.

"Self? What is that?" The scarlet-headed god turned to the sun rising in the west of a country Byrgirou had never seen before. "I know once I existed at time's dawn but after my death, I became another similar to myself."

"You died?"

"Who do think wished become a sun?" he asked. "But one of my children created me in the image of what I had been and so I imagine it was but a child who perished when it was in fact myself."

"What am I to do?" he asked.

"Did you not seek to kill your darker half? Die, here and now and I will restore you and you will know existence without any stain of this darker influence upon you."

"How can I trust you?"

"How can you not trust yourself?"

And with such logic as this Byrgirou died. He rose upward carried in the palm of his more powerful reflection and suddenly he created in himself something he wished to be, a form of blazing light, and then he was gone.

And there was nothing there, neither light nor existence and just as suddenly he was restored and placed upon the earth again, an earth created by Hyalgaria Izelon.

And the shadow now was gone from off him utterly.

He felt cleansed. He felt as if he was a house emptied and he imagined he could understand finally such perfect peace.

He stared at the sun and felt . . . nothing. He stared at the

ground and nothing seemed to be there. The sky, the singing crystal women floating on the breeze, his other reflected self, nothing was real to him now.

Inside of him was nothing. He felt empty. And recalling Donegal and Yyaalis and all his children nothing clung to him. They had become as shadows, as wisps of smoke or sea foam, and were they standing in his midst he would feel nothing as if they had always been gone. And he was alone and felt nothing and knew that he was cold.

They in his likeness had desired this, to achieve some perfect end, some perfect shape, some final end match-noted to perfection but it was an emptiness deeper than Zanaan. And at the mention of the name, he was there. They were there. But it was an odd world, unlike before. And the beings were human, not kyrarai and they dwelled in silver cities by malachite-stained seas. And he longed, (but could he long if he felt nothing?), to feel something else. To become. To be.

And in his first action, he brought bubbling to his thoughts passion, anger, the driving force embedded in everything. And imperfectly it stained everything and yet those things existed now, even imperfectly. And Byrgirou finally was.

And the shadow was Byrgirou and Byrgirou had become finally a part of everything he sought to be.

"I miss them," he said.

"You should," he replied, "so start again."

"It's like tarnishing their memory . . ."

"Except the Byrgirou who knew them also now is dead. You are someone else now. Choose your own path ahead."

And the universe closed and another and another, as he saw, reflected back all of them, all those realities each un-lived possibility brought forth as he saw the haquil and imagined them the editors of everything.

Then he opened his eyes to the sun as the light kept pouring in.

Chapter 27
The jaguar scorpion shadow prince of time

Voienar is dull country occupied by wasp-kings who in their sunless towers sit upon thrones and ponder and imagine that beyond their kingdom lay nothing while six moons overhead exist and each of them cannot imagine beings who imagine all things are their dominion and divinity.

The caravan led to the port of Nubla and afterward, the three journeyed into the city of the insect-kind. It was a marvel of rare device unlike anything Kuty ever saw before, the city's buildings were purple mixed with white streaks and they bulged like the hives of insects and insect merchants trod the streets.

They were like preying mantids, (these were creatures Cala described to her,) and large and jewel-bright eyes of blue and violet perched on spindled necks and strange chitinous hands wove from them threads which hardened as ceramic or burnt clay.

The humans had already gone by now. The caravan was heading from Pyral to the tent city of Phyr and though the humans seemed pleasant, almost nice, they were alien enough Kuty did not want to spend long in their company.

And so, they vanished as mist within a mirage.

The nubla stared at Cala and the jalal. Brehe had come with them, the sleek-bodied creature who Cala knew but Kuty didn't know how.

For some reason the humans feared her but in Cala's presence they calmly accepted the claws, the fangs, the wings.

And Brehe seemed so strange, marvelling at the city, licking Cala's hands and pressed close to her, and Kuty felt such a strange and stranger thing.

Had she a word for it she would have called it jealousy.

In Bursania Baligostria made his plea. Before the people, he explained what he had seen, that he had seen his people called the galic in the time before, slaves before who had arisen and become greater.

Odd, as he came in the giants seemed stumbled and he realized it in his polemic way. Kyos was now theirs and theirs utterly, a whole realm added to theirs, and as if like mist vanished in a mirage all thoughts of the kyrarai were vanishing.

Of course, the younger generation already knew little of them but now as he talked he tailored carefully his words, seeing the bland expressions of the young children realizing he had become a stranger in a strange land.

Had he a word for it he would have called it nostalgia. He had become the last trace of a wistful longing only he completely understood.

Later after his talk with those lieges of the lower lands he turned to the west as something caught wicked inside him.

He didn't have to stay.

Far to the west, the dwarves lay and from them, he could go anywhere. He still recalled the continents of malachite his ancestors came from. But rather than taking the long way home, he decided to go east.

He would take a swim.

But first, he wrote down something important he now knew, etching it into the gates.

The beginning, the middle, and the end.

Then he went off, stopped, returned to the runic words and added **start again.**

And then he left, never to return.

Xiaosgo noticed the three and went out to meet them.

"Ah, yes, please, please come in," the insect clicked. Cala

bowed to him then. She may have been uncertain in the Cyas Caves, (who wasn't?) but this was her dominion and Xiaosgo was a good friend.

Kuty came into a small work area where several small nubla were creating small ceramic bowls.

"Ah, pleased to meet you," he said, extending a three-fingered, slender hand. Kuty took it and the insect gazed at her with an oddly certain glance. The jalal meanwhile had gone to a corner and nestled there as if on familiar ground.

"So how have you been Cala? And whoever is your friend?"

"This is Kuty Hugut, and it is a long story."

"I imagine so, but it hardly matters." With a series of long clicks suddenly the twelve smaller nubla rose from their seated positions on the wall and went to a backroom. "I can smell the adrenaline off you, my dear. You all need a good rest. Oh," he added turning to the backroom, "if you want to sell the teleporter it would be wisest to go to the dwarves for that."

"No, I don't think we're going there," Cala said.

They ate quietly, a small type of grub hardened like soft glass which somehow didn't cut Kuty's mouth at all. They, all of them except Brehe, sat about a rounded table sharing the meal which lay at the centre, a large yellowed worm the nubla considered a delicacy.

At least there was substance to it, Kuty thought to herself as she fed.

"So, the scoira are well?" he asked.

"Yeah, we couldn't stay too long and I doubt we will be welcomed back. Long story. Not important."

"Of course. And you Kuty? Wherever are you from?"

"I think it mattered once but it doesn't matter anymore," she said. "Where do all the humans come from?"

"Well, originally it was called Earth. I visited it once

myself so ago, before they changed the name to Rhom about, how many eons ago was that . . .?"

"I meant the city here actually," she corrected him.

"Ah, Pyral, the city of Pyral my dear."

Is everyone on Candra immortal, she wondered, then realized she had only met a handful of beings and some like the scoira were certainly not long-lived. Considering all she had seen she had only met three, four if one counted the arisai, and long-lived hardly meant immortal in any case.

"Can you tell me about Earth?" she asked.

And so, the insect merchant spent the evening telling the girl of Earth, of its beginning and its end and what happened afterward.

And she listened and understood and that night she slept, dreaming of vanished lands.

Cala was beside her in their bed but then Brehe came in and crept and Kuty turned to see black fur poised carefully near Cala's face, one face pressed against her own, and then thought a hated thought.

But sleep took her then.

Oddly realizing as she woke Kuty knew she had no place to go.

She woke and sat up in bed. Cala had gone downstairs and Brehe had curled to a corner seemingly asleep but Kuty knew otherwise.

"Wake up," Kuty said. And Brehe pretended she did.

The jalal crept over to the girl and stared at her eye to eye.

"You are such a peculiar thing," the jalal said.

"And why is that?"

"You feel as I feel for her and yet you don't know the word. How ever did you meet?"

"Cala told you."

"I can tell when she's lying child."

"Don't call me child."

"Finally, a truthful thought from you. I think we can be friends." The jalal slunk away to the door. "Or at least interesting enemies."

And then she was gone down the stairs.

The port of Nubla was a haven for many beings. After so long running to find oneself in relative calm, with food, (relatively good food,) water, and company, it seemed almost astonishing to her.

Xiaosgo was a gracious host. He had indeed lived a long time but seldom of his kind had. For some reason arriving here shortened their natural age.

Cala introduced her to many beings she knew. And Brehe. Brehe never seemed to leave Cala's side.

And the words from the Hive-Mother continued to reverberate in her ears and mind. *And because I love them, I'd do anything for them.*

What did love really mean?

She'd have to ask Cala. At the thought of her name at the table Kuty felt oddly warm then turning noticed Brehe curled to a corner and felt another thing. A familiar hatred as of old but wasn't old.

It was jealousy.

And far away with opened eyes, Byrgirou stumbled to himself like some jaguar scorpion prince of time.

Chapter 28
The wine-dark sea of lost delights

Vornas is a gas giant, a violet spinning storm, and about it are nine moons, nine houses, each occupied by four-winged beings with their twig-thin forms. And each of them can brush into the skies of Vornas and know and seek above while they forget the smaller world above.

"How do you feel?" the Hive-Mother asked.

"I don't completely know, but somehow," he stood up, "I finally understand."

On human legs, he strode and noticed the ring etched into his palm and etched into the metal another hand with a gemstone blossom blistering out of it.

"Thank you," Byrgirou said simply and noticed his voice again. When the shadow had been taken from him, he spoke as a machine in that other place, without any trace of anything.

He seemed similar here, separate from himself, but now noticed his voice finally and for the first time.

He sounded alive again. Or had he ever sounded alive?

He stumbled and the Hive-Mother moved but with a gesture made her stop and he fell on alien legs to the cool flagstones and then rose on his own again.

Why had he ever feared falling? He couldn't say.

"I must leave," he said, turning to her. "I must leave to take back what was lost. But first I must create some things here. I can't afford to abandon my creation again."

"Spoken like a true creator," the Hive-Mother said. "And whatever will you create?"

"I don't know. But at least it's not too late to find out."

And Byrgirou stood in the sun and watched the mountains twist with their shadows and touched his chest as if recalling the memory of an old friend.

First, I must create my form.

I must return to my true shape, not this alien guise I used to make fit some aspect that did not match myself.

Now, now I must turn and think. What is it I desire? What want I? What do I need?

I need my family restored to me. I need to stretch forth a limb and let go for it will never perfectly come again but I remember and what are memories if not something recalled one can never have again, but which still somehow exist?

His features, their features, all their features, backward sons and daughters, backward to the source, back to this moment upon the cliffs and shores of the upper world . . .

"Old-father?"

The voice is so familiar and I recall the voice and . . .

"Old-father?"

Her voice too, their voices also, his and theirs, and I am . . .

"Old-father?"

I am surrounded by the company of my children.

Why had I ever hesitated?

Because I have to accept these tears, this heart.

I am.

The Hive-Mother watched Byrgirou surrounded in the presence of his children and his children surrounded one another as strength the old god felt and light came to his land.

"That's a start," the shadow almost said, or rather the thought bubbled in his mind which the Hive-Mother heard, her pleasure mingling with the shadow's own, and her enjoyment of experiencing war against the man.

It was hardly every day one could fight a deity and later consider him a friend.

Brehe purred and slunk to a nearby pool of turquoise

water to rest. The jalal of the Orsane Plains were usually quite dangerous but the nubla knew she was no threat.

Cala somehow domesticated her. Or perhaps somehow the two found a connection neither expected.

And the words of the Hive-Mother kept racing through Kuty's head.

So, she decided to go on walkabout.

Among the bazaars the nubla traded in strange things, ornate jewels bred from the eyes of gods or what they claimed were gods, tomes of old lore with titles such as *Arjada-a Cjhaot* or *Leaves of Grass*.

The bazaars occupied a corridor with violet-white buildings bulging about creating in her mind imaginings of giants all around.

But there was no threat here or none beyond what she found.

Outside of the city walls she gazed into the Fire Wastes and began her tread. She didn't know what she was looking for but she'd know it when she found it.

Cala was in the company of the nubla with a meal prepared, herself finally at rest.

And as she wandered eyes pierced her soul, glittering jewellike eyes as a form shadowlike went splintering over the scarlet sands, seeming shortly just like grass.

And Kuty wasn't alone with her thoughts yet.

Chapter 29
Death on the bridge of the shadowlands

Le-Tron is a country of grey stone labyrinths where the sun dares not intrude. And those of Le-Tron appear in the guise of men, of women, save this; they two faces have, four arms, four legs, each pair going in opposite directions from each other, each face opposite the other, so if they wish to go forward or go back both halves must be in agreement or no motion will be.

And which way is forward and back if both believe the way they see ahead is the only way to go?

What is it I am feeling? she asked.

Was she born human of an older skin she might have known ancient stories of romance and lovers but her knowledge had grown thin and her mother knew nothing of such thoughts.

"Though in truth the elves do not either child, so sing a prayer for them."

Turning she saw a form itching across the sands. It seemed a shadow but was blue as those of Myr yet composed of a lump of flesh, perhaps? Not a snake but serpentine, and then small insect limbs jutted and it slithered close to her.

Kuty drew her axe and the body cooled and slowed out of reach of her weapon's touch.

"What are you?" Kuty asked.

"I am Kuiliujudra and I mean no harm to you. I am of the moselantja. Have you ever heard of us?"

"Yes, Cala mentioned your kind in passing once. But she said you looked similar to elf, or human."

"True," and with a gesture legs grew, breasts, arms, and two wide eyes appeared in an almost lovely face, "and so in this moment I am. But I can become anything and so I think, *yes,* you

deserve an enemy more than a friend."

"Why do you come to me?" the human asked.

"Strange term that really, human." In a moment the moselantja became a human woman, her skin dark as night, her eyes pale pools. "I have been human, strode into Pyral pretending to be human. They are interesting, if alien, but you I think more intimately understand the way I feel."

"Perhaps. But I cannot return to what I never was."

"And why should you? What would be the point of that? No, one must move forward. Knowledge cannot be denied. But tell me, which direction is that?"

And suddenly Kuty turned in all directions and realized she didn't know the way back.

"I do not know," Kuty said.

"Exactly! Well since we have nowhere to go why don't I put on a show for you, young human newly born? Why don't I show you a story while we wait for night to fall?"

"Why wait for the night?"

"The port of Nubla becomes ablaze at night, a star cast near the edges of the sea. Child's play to find it after dark but for now," the desert stretched in all directions, "I dare say if we go wandering aimlessly we'll both die long before we reach our final end. So, how about a story then?"

And Kuty agreed and sat and watched the artist work.

"Now this is a very old story from Earth. It is the story of Araxes and Acacia." As the moselantja spoke she became another human with scarlet hair and wearing scales of armour from what seemed a serpentine thing.

"Acacia was a warrior from the plains of Tlosque during the time before the end when the oceans dried. She wielded a sword . . ."

"What is a sword?"

"I'm getting to that," and a long taper of metal appeared

in her hand, like a dagger but longer. It seemed somehow impractical for such a heavy runic thing to wield, "and with it sought the dark lord Astryonix," then she changed to a human in black robes, "who killed her tribe and seemingly killed her home.

"Well, as she journeyed, she acquired companions. There was Araxes of the water, Maleron of the maze, Mistletoe of the night," and so she became a broad man, then a slender one in robes, then a vampire woman like from Moravan, "and Acacia swore her heart to the first man to defeat her in battle, and Araxes won. He fought and defeated her squarely . . ."

"So, this is love then?"

"Hardly. How do you arrange love with a test, with some criteria? If I do this, this, that, surely she will love me, surely he will fall into my arms? Please, were such things easy as all that . . . no. I was about to mention lust but let's get through love first. Lust sometimes follows after that.

"So , the companions are en route to the dark king's castle, he who has spent his entire life of utter villainy . . ."

"Villainy?"

"Evil."

"Ah."

"And en route they have many adventures. They face dragons," a dragon full of bright glittering scales she became, "they faced the creatures of the last ocean," things of tentacles appeared, "and in all this, they fought together."

Suddenly the moselantja became Acacia and Araxes, hand in hand staring at one another.

"Soon our quest will be ended brave Araxes."

"Soon will all our labours be concluded and the monster will be dead."

Then Mistletoe was added, her hand amid theirs.

"Ditto," she said and then vanished like sea foam on the mist.

"And so," Acacia turned to Kuty, "they journeyed on until

they reached the castle and amid countless trials and traps reached the upper room and there confronted the one who had caused such misery . . . and . . .”

“And what?”

“Killed him.”

“So, the story concluded then?”

“Hardly. Now they had to get on with the rest of their lives after all. There was an old affectation the humans used. ‘They lived happily ever after.’ They tacked it to the end of many such stories,” the moselantja became a light blue-skinned woman again, her widened eyes easily four times the size of Kuty’s own, easily larger than those of any dreamer of Myr, “meant to show that after all the labours were ended everyone was at peace and no portion of their former stories clung to them. But how I ask you can one simply forget? How can one simply ignore their past or worse assume that whoever they were is gone? Now, don’t get me wrong, the past as they say is prologue but after all you’ve learned and done what do you want to do with it? How do you want to change the world?

“Knowledge cannot be denied.”

“What about love, you said you’d teach me that word.”

“Ah yes, you see on the way back Maleron, the dark-haired sage grew ill, the scholar sickened and Acacia realized in her heart he was the man she sought, except in his agony he turned to Mistletoe who gladly made him like her.

“Acacia lost the one she sought while left with the one she thought to have based on little more than an assumption of what she wanted. And she died desolate and alone after that with but a small dragon as a companion who seemed a reflection of the boy she’d lost. Thus ends the story there.

“Now, tell me, child, tell me truly, if Cala were here dying would you stay by her side, defend her, or escape?”

“I’d defend.”

“You’d protect, and why? If you could escape?”

“Because she’s my world,” Kuty said.

“Exactly. Well, night’s falling. We should be on our way, though, you know, I could always turn into your mother for a time before we go. I suspect you have some rough words to say to her.”

“Why would I do that?” Kuty asked. “It’s in the past.”

And so moselantja and human turned toward the bright and shining city of her new home.

Chapter 30
The parable of the javelin thrower

Cedhe Ul-Luthis Talis is an endless world. Utan Etalis sails overhead her and yet never can it reach even the corner of her garments nor touch even the shadow of her robes as if all the world a woman was, and as if the moon would know.

The countries recede from one's grasp forever and the longer one stays upon it the sooner one realizes the country one passes through never can return for the land is endless here, stretching on forever; infinity and eternity inside a teardrop of existence, and yet, and yet, and yet . . .

Beyond Cedhe lay the world Anyrairyn, a place of harvests sent, and Inmdlhyryn a realm of ice and snow, and sometimes something flutters world to world, above or down below, a memory of spring or a scent of endless snow . . .

The jalal among the Ruins slaked their thirst on bones. But Brehe now was gone. She always seemed a strange one who danced amid her food, who sang to those she should consume.

And yet when she joined them the other jalal shied not from her but rallied with her and fought and laughed and flew and cursed. And fought some more.

It was pleasurable company to be amid one who walked between those they sought to feed on and those they were.

She was as a wandering wind who'd return eventually.

The haquil moved between the walls of the worlds watching countless myriad reflections of themselves as the utter endless varieties of possibilities caught wicked in them.

Of course, the plot threads seemed to be coming to a close. Some imagined this was true though others thought perhaps their

lens of perception had become inversed. Perhaps all this was prologue, all this time's reckoning and they were nothing but an afterthought to await the actors yet to come and be. Or not.

One gazed at a scene upon other Fire Wastes as a human girl fought a jalal for the prize of the woman both intimately knew.

Axe's silver bit to air and fangs uncurled their subtle logic there and furs bent black with red and fair, fair features withered. And Cala in-between they were, trying to seek amends but neither could give up or rest.

And one died and fell. In one version of events, it was Kuty, in another Brehe, in a third Cala caught between.

And onward into this arcane land went Kuty to the port of Nubla with her shadow accompanying.

Byrgirou stood upon Cedhe Ul-Luthis Talis. The lands stretched in all directions, strange ziggurats of continents arranged against long lattices of ocean roads. He could step from this exact spot and never find his way back again.

And far above his children revelled in their rebirth.

And his heart ached and he let it ache and slowly the wound closed over as if it were made of flesh.

But I am not the man I was, he thought. *I could not even be the man I am. No, not man. I am arisai. And I am content. That I am not content.*

And his shadow sang no more to him for he felt it blistering rightly black against his skin.

It's time to start again, he said.

And did.

"I'm reminded of a story," the Hive-Mother said. In the dark below the great chamber thundered with the sound of her breath.

"A story Hive-Mother," one of the saima asked while

countless others were tending to the ancient coils, each scale larger than itself.

"There was a being who dwelled upon an ancient plain, flat and featureless, and he was a javelin thrower, and this being, neither saima nor any species you would know of decided to test his skill with his chosen craft.

"And he aimed perfectly and tossed the great obsidian staff upward to the sky, watching it land in the middle of that endless, featureless land.

"'I've hit my target' he exclaimed, though he had none to share his triumph with except the canvas of his art. And the plains did not answer him.'"

"What is the purpose of the story?"

"Different possibilities. Same claim it means the javelin thrower perfectly hit his target, knowing the exact spot of a blank world. Others think he had gone mad. Personally I suspect the story means perfection means little if there was none to share in it. Damn, I should have told that story to Byrgirou."

"Hive-Mother I suspect he suspects this truth, or knows."

Great coils of flesh rose up as if the ancient being sighed.

"I suspect you're right. He knows."

And the green fire licked above and the Hive-Mother slumbered, certain in her rest.

And finally, but finally Kuty returned home and the moselantja turned back to the desert to look for others who might have lost their way.

Chapter 31
Land of little human doves
with strange scared masks there of

Eolthalia and Tsuanghi are two planets strung together, separated from the other by their parent star. Red and green they swim the ocean of the night knowing of each other intimately, all life on Eolthalia knowing of Tsuanghi and all of Tsuanghi knowing of Eolthalia yet never able to touch the other.

What silence and such loneliness would cling to such as these?

"What am I to you?" Kuty asked Cala as she sat in a bone-white garden. The question blistered in her and she would have it answered now. The nubla were elsewhere as Brehe had pricked her ears and stared up at the pair.

"Ah," Cala said. *Stupid, say something else*.

"Please, answer me truthfully. What am I to you?"

And all Cala could think of was her first meeting with Brehe in the Ruins, how the jalal had run her down, licked the bridge of her nose, decided not to kill her and the two became fast friends, more, even though by all logic Cala should have been dead.

And the jalal had decided, why? why had she decided to spare her? She seemed like all other jalal and yet for some reason had nestled her face against Cala's own and that was that.

"Yes," Brehe purred, "what is she to you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I had a chat with a moselantja in the Fire Wastes . . ."

"So that's where you went, I was worried . . ."

"Is that what I am to you? Worry?"

And the jalal crept closer to the pair. *Now the circle closes*, the jalal said in her heart. *Cala asked such a question of me once and I answered readily.*

"No, of course not. I don't know what to say, exactly."

"What did I tell you when that question you asked of me?" Brehe asked.

The jalal was now rubbing her body against Cala's bare legs. And Kuty realized she did not like the way the jalal moved at all.

"You said you loved me," Cala replied.

"I said I love you. So, if she asks the same question and the same answer presents itself, what do you say? What answer is left?"

"I love you," Cala said. But she was not looking at the jalal.

"Good girl," Brehe said and strode on white-sharp talons into another room. "Oh, don't worry Kuty," she said, not even bothering to look back, "the word you seek in me, that word I see begging to be born upon your lips means nothing to my kind. Good luck."

And the jalal was gone.

"You love me," Kuty said.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I asked her the same thing."

"What did she say?"

"She couldn't answer me."

"Can you answer me?"

"I can't. I just do. I know if you were gone . . ."

"You'd mourn me."

"Yeah." And Cala put her arm around Kuty's shoulders and the two sat by a violet square pool upon a woven bench, staring at the moons rising, scarlet and silver. "I really was worried about where you went."

"So where do we go from here?"

"Kiss her you idiot," a voice from the other room said.

And Cala did.

Chapter 32
Wearing masks of bright obsidian they moved on again

Ensara and Hakkore are two worlds strewn together, grey and cool places where the sun but seldom seen is merely a remembered echo of a remembrance of might-have-been.

And those of Ensara and all those of Hakkore can cross the barrier between; in lonely lands their company the tenuous thread of life becomes.

Donegal stood upon Ensara and likewise was standing upon Hakkore. He died. He remembered. He was restored.

I should have died with them he thought, then realized he had.

I was true to myself, he said. *I will be true again, but differently.*

And out of Ensara and Hakkore small isles of bacteria began. They clustered upward from the grey seas and across both lands they spread. In a heartbeat they became larger, coalescing all together, in a heartbeat a history unwinding back.

They swept upward all together becoming larger with every step.

He wondered if they would have wings in time or cloven hooves or wolf faces, but perhaps another way they would portend.

And Yyaalis came to him and the two sat gazing upward at the stars which seemed littered across black sands.

Then the pair went on while in another heartbeat the tahlregn became and wearing masks of bright obsidian they wandered hand in hand.

Wearing masks of bright obsidian, they moved on again . . .

Chapter 33
A waiting hunger that will not rest or burn

Trelevan is not a world. It is a multitude. First, the earth itself is like any other and about it a number of moons, each equal in smallness to its parent form. And about each moon is a smaller and a smaller one, each time an equal number of smaller pieces revolving about its parent, orbits within orbits without true end.

And on each Trelevan the same lives are lived, going on and on forever, a mosaic of a multitude similar and identical, so when one dies it seems a world dies with him . . .

Byrgirou had returned to the Cyas Caves.

He turned amid the planets circling their mad orbits athwart others so like themselves and now he stood at the sacred place.

Darsyap-Igel was there still, forced to view all things that were not, could not now be himself.

Was there such a place as hell Byrgirou imagined such a place was this.

It was why none were meant to exist after their own end.

He had ended and began again. *Am I the man I am?*

An old question, unimportant now.

Two options presented themselves to him.

He could simply leave this half-formed thing here and let it linger forever, groping and searching for some escape, or free it, let it die. Or give it a second chance, though surely that right belonged to the victims of the thing.

He could simply try again, erase whatever evil had been there, and start again, but what was evil really? What had drawn such actions on?

He could look within, define, autopsy, explain. There were

uncounted places where the meanings were assured, where the explanations mattered. He could have done all this because of some affliction or some ideology or some cancer-wise venom strewn to his heart. But it didn't matter.

Here now robbed of all else Byrgirou was a creator and Darsyap-Igel a portion of his creation. He couldn't abandon him.

He decided upon another tack . . .

All else Byrgirou stripped away. Gone were scarlet versions of Candra or gardens of fire. Gone the ice-spire age. Gone all else but exactly as things were before. He winnowed and cut a small piece of an alternate shape and let all things become the same.

Save that Darsyap-Igel didn't exist.

He was not here. And from the point of his absence, things changed.

Taken from the course of his life Darsyap-Igel watched all things play out, *yet little changed*. Oh, some things stayed the same, and the kyrarai were not exiled but there was still war. Still death. Still, someone took a villain's place, if briefly, or not at all. But all things moved on even with Darsyap gone.

After so long watching each life play out to see no life left, he began to change.

Then another, another Candra after it with another subtle change, and again Darsyap-Igel was written out of it. Then a few more and each time the gap of him remained.

But Byrgirou moved slowly, showing him Candra after Candra and then let him fade away, little by little into a pure nothingness. And nothing of him remained, the last thoughts upon nonexistent lips muttering, "I did not make the world I made."

And Byrgirou went on from the Cyas Caves content of all he did and the shadow of him but following, following . . . happily.

Chapter 34
The elf-land murders, the leaf-land murders then

Kendra is a world of storms, of grey beaches echoed of old times and old ships splintered into foam. Kendra would seem as though it were peopled all of storms.

After that night Cala and Kuty decided to journey north a time. Brehe was returning to the Ruins but she would be back.

"Look after her," Brehe said, but Kuty wasn't certain who she was talking to.

They took a ship going north upon a nubla vessel woven of white and violet and in the distance as they sailed the city of the moselantja in the far distance could be seen. Blue spires rose like glass upon the Fire Wastes and Kuty and Cala could see them finally.

To the west of the waters lay the isle of Moravan where the vampires slumbered, dreaming of past things.

To the north, they came to the forests of Valari to see Cala's home a final time.

They did not stay but remained upon the sleek prow of the ship, the nubla captain noticing as the elf pointed to the trees.

And she whispered to Kuty of ancient things and an ancient history as some elves appeared amid the oaks. They seemed pale and frightened at the passing vessel and Kuty imagined she might go norther still, perhaps see the galleries of the dwarves.

Anything was possible but she wished for something else.

As the ship turned back the way it came, she noticed a hoary-headed being rising from sea foam heading north.

So, he is going in my place, the woman said to herself.

It was uncertainty which gripped the pair of them. The quest was ended now though hardly any quest as they'd

understand the term, the word itself an anachronism seldom used anymore.

They returned to the port after seeing the isle of Xymth below and the isle of Moravan and in the ancient bone bazaar Kuty decided to learn a trade and under the guidance of the nubla began her education.

And clay was given to her but she lacked the strength to fashion clay as they nor could she weave as they wove from her being.

Yet she laboured and fought and there in the bone bazaar slowly turned the earth to something out of memory.

At first, it seemed shapeless but she continued to splinter into the slowly hardened form and suddenly a limb appeared, then another and another as upon four legs she rested her creation.

Then the small silhouettes of wings, a scorpion's tail, an oddly human face peering at her from herself as if she were reflecting in the earth some deeper aspect of her being.

And when finished she had forged a likeness of Byrgirou.

At night she slept beside Cala dreaming strange dreams.

There was a parchment and an instrument to write with and Kuty began there beside the square pool of violet water.

And she slowly poured out a story of a murdered woman upon the grass and the story grew and grew, the leaf-land murder and the murderer and the more she saw the less she understood. In cool deserts of darkness by daylight Kuty wrote a new mythology in her head.

She imagined someone who uncovered the killer and brought them to account.

Xiaosgo appeared in her dream, the wanderer who long ago had visited ancient Earth.

"A mystery story," the nubla said, "an excellent form to

use."

"When the story is finished and all the actions are tied up what will happen then?"

"Either a new story takes the place of the old or the old is repeated. Tell me, who is your murderer in the tale?"

"I think it is myself," she said.

And in the waking world in the great forests, an elfin body lay rotting and none bothered to bury it.

Chapter 35
The walls between the worlds broke again

Ichelia was known as the Lawyer's Moon for all the myriad laws were gathered up as gall to it. And eventually, so many laws were made and stored in their mausoleums, their ziggurats of tomes it was impossible to take a step without committing some small wrong.

Of course, the law is one thing and justice is another.

The gates had been absent but they reappeared.

The life's blood of the arisai flickered into doors of blue as a blue-skinned woman glanced through and a man of grey, a woman with sixteen arms, insects of golden armour, and even the great ziggurats of Ichelia could be seen.

And suddenly there was much more to explore.

Names tumbled as from an hourglass; Jyrra and Ololex, Escaliet-reia and Caelfeld, Twerule and Solixa and Ryamcaliru and Locheby. And with each word new strength was added to them.

But one name eluded still.

Ledhia had not been created yet.

And so Byrgirou bent his labour to the task, drew up his breath and prepared his final act . . .

Chapter 36
The land of the leaf-feathered women

Dularia is a jungle whose only occupants are spiders invisible who invisibly tend their webs. And a girl arrived in their sanctum and became queen to them, though such as this should not be.

How could a girl become a god to them who she couldn't even see?

And Ledhia was created.

Green grass, great oaks and a river running through it and with each step unknowingly Byrgirou added to his creation. Fur-tinged bodies, racing thunder, yellow lakes of eyes though now they were but lakes and hidden thoughts became an aspect of the place.

And Byrgirou with each step created a continent and then with a thought was carried to a garden ground and there he watched the leaf-feathered women passing by. Were he aware of it he might have imagined they were pieces from the last storm-demon's dreams somehow arranged here, walking by slender as a branch. To the heart of the emerald garden, the leaf-feathered women went, one of them was a murderer, born to condemn and catch and be caught.

He gazed at them.

They stood within an amphitheatre, each moving in concert to an unseen command. One took the role of victim, "and here I stand and here I make my stand," another became murderer, "I stick my dagger here and here and here," a third uncovered the crime, "thou art accused!" and a fourth passed judgement on the guilty, "you are guilty."

And then the roles changed.

She who had been victim became murderer, murderer the uncoverer of crime, the passer of judgement the victim.

But the drama remained the same.

And Byrgirou watched transfixed never knowing that the green peacock feather bright faces of the women wore Kuty's face as their own, like a mask might be worn and yet somehow unknown.

And Byrgirou wandered the grounds of his new creation unknowing how they had been created or what thought guided the old-father.

And Kuty in her sleep turned and opened her eyes, saw Cala's face across her own and smiled and slumbered with her hand in hand.

Chapter 37
The dark unbeguiling of her spirit

Charon is a far country once asleep but in the covened places of the hills swept dreams which, in taking form, drew off the nature of other realities.

Some became as dragons, some as knights, some acquired sixteen arms, insect armour, and golden blood, and some sighed with a crystalline quality.

Some merely sighed.

But of the dreamers themselves?

None could know the true formed shape of them.

Beginnings are easy. I said that at the start. It's easy to start something, but much more difficult to fathom the end.

Cala and Kuty dwelled in the city of the nubla where she became a great artist, beloved of her sculptures.

Or.

Cala returned to exploring other hidden corners of Candra, Kuty by her side and eventually, they even journeyed south so far they encountered the hidden xi, the ant-born insect princes with their ships of nightmare, light, and fire which once had swam across the skies and somehow made them become a part of the world above.

Or.

Cala and Kuty remained in Nubla for a time but then decided to head north after all, arriving at the dwarves' galleries and there booked passage off-world where eventually, just by chance they arrived at Ledhia and somehow all the pieces fit together how they all bore the faces of the face she wore.

Or.

Cala fell ill of some illness and Kuty journeyed to the Cyas

Caves to find some remedy and either found a way to save her in the company of the haquil, or not.

Or.

Flip Cala and Kuty and all else remains the same.

Or.

Or they died. One or the other, of something, anything, something minor or unimportant or extremely important.

But they died.

And.

And, the survivor mourned the loss of her beloved and then mourned some more and either let despair and the fears consume her or moved on, perhaps to the forests of Valari, the city of Pyral, the lands below, the worlds above, and somehow found another.

And.

And she started again.

And that story hasn't been written yet and in truth, any of these stories could be the truth, or more, or less.

One doesn't know.

One simply must pretend.

Chapter 38
You are what you leave behind

Ledhia was the first world that Byrgirou created after his long absence from all things, where the leaf-feathered women dwelled in their citadels of memory.

They performed great rituals, and ancient recollections, and some became Oedipus or Macbeth, Hamlet or Kyskalios, Marciela Blyime or the little king singing at world's end, or edge.

And some departed going to other worlds, performing their ancient craft across creation and all the tragedies of being and all their myriad possibilities, all the gardens of forking paths.

And Byrgirou was content.

And he was gathered to his people in the fullness of his days.

And the shadow slithered on the grass of Ledhia's long luscious fields, sang with pipes an hourglass, and when the final dust wind fell, smiled, and wept.

Of course, Byrgirou would return in time.

But for the moment, that was that.

Baligostria strode to the great grey gallery and stared down at the minute beings in his wake.

The vessel loomed before him, designed to accommodate anything to anywhere in all creation.

"Are you ready?" The clean-shaven dwarf asked and he nodded his reply, entered the silvery doors seemingly of winter, strapped himself in and soon he would fly.

He did not know to where, but it hardly mattered.

He had time.